EDITED BY
FRIDA BECKMAN AND JEFFREY R. DI LEO

THEORY CONSPIRACY

Routledge

"Conspiracy theories are shallow but run deep—borne of antiquity, perfected in modernity, and ubiquitous today as virtual intellectualisms of the most paranoid kind. They are a perverse philosophy of history about who controls what, or what controls whom. They concern less the 'Other' than the 'They.' For all these reasons and more, this volume is ever so urgent. In their impressively erudite and lively essays, the authors convened here demonstrate that committed reading is the only means we have to understand conspiracy theory in all of its bewildering plurality. They show you how to think conspiracies from within in order to critique them from without. Essential reading is an understatement to describe *Theory Conspiracy*."

Andrew Cole, *Princeton University, USA*

"This highly engaging, original and timely collection of essays confronts the problems of living in an era of theory overload, a world in which images and figures cohere into elaborate accounts of how we live now. Even if those accounts don't match reality, they nevertheless expose something of the Real. The events explored in this book—from Trump to Gilets Jaunes— are more worthy of critique, more fascinating, and more illuminating than the banalities of actuality. *Theory Conspiracy* is as entertaining as it is significant."

Claire Colebrook, *Penn State University, USA*

THEORY CONSPIRACY

Theory Conspiracy provides a state-of-the-art collection that takes stage on the meeting and/or battlegrounds between conspiracy theory and theory-as-conspiracy. By deliberately scrambling the syntax—conspiracy theory cum theory conspiracy—it seeks to open a set of reflections on the articulation between theory and conspiracy that addresses how conspiracy might rattle the sense of theory as such. In this sense, the volume also inevitably stumbles on the recent debates on postcritique. The suspicion that our ways of reading in the humanities have been far too suspicious, if not paranoid, has gained considerable attention in a humanities continuously questioned as superfluous at best and leftist and dangerous at worst. The chapters in this volume all approach this problematic from different angles. It features clear engaging writing by a set of contributors who have published extensively on questions of paranoia, conspiracy theory, and/or the state of theory today. This collection will appeal to readers interested in conspiracy theories, critical theory, and the future of humanities.

Frida Beckman is Professor of Literature at the Department of Culture and Aesthetics at Stockholm University, Sweden.

Jeffrey R. Di Leo is Professor of English and Philosophy at the University of Houston-Victoria. He is founder and editor of *symplokē*, and Executive Director of the Society for Critical Exchange and its Winter Theory Institute. He is the author, editor, or co-editor of 35 books.

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THEORY CONSPIRACY

An Introduction

Frida Beckman and Jeffrey R. Di Leo

Conspiracy has long been associated with critical theory in the West, much longer, in fact, than recent debates on postcritique tend to remember. Perhaps the most well-known instance involves the positivism debate between the critical rationalist Karl Popper and members of the Frankfurt School such as Theodor W. Adorno and Jürgen Habermas. Occurring in the early 1960s, the debate concerned the methodology of the social sciences. According to Popper, many rationalist approaches to society are associated with conspiracy theory. Beginning in the second edition of *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1952, 2nd ed.) and continuing in subsequent editions (1957, 1962, and 1966), Popper argues that the conspiracy theory of society that is held by these rationalists is the opposite of the true aim of the social sciences. As Popper describes it, the conspiracy theory of society is

> the view that an explanation of a social phenomenon consists in the discovery of the men or groups who are interested in the occurrence of this phenomenon (sometimes it is a hidden interest which has first to be revealed), and who have planned and conspired to bring it about.[1]

As a view of the aims of the social sciences, the conspiracy theory of society stems "from the mistaken theory that, whatever happens in society—especially happenings such as war, unemployment, poverty, shortages, which people as a rule dislike—is the result of direct design by some powerful individuals and groups."[2] According to Popper, the conspiracy theory of society is a widely held view.[3]

But if Popper opened the door for somber critical debate regarding the role of conspiracy in sociology and philosophy, later theorists brought

the conversation into much more sensational and open-ended directions. A prime example is the "Schizo-Culture" conference in 1975. Held at Columbia University, it was organized by Sylvère Lotringer, literature professor at Columbia University and founder, in the previous year, of *Semiotext(e)* as a journal of semiotics. Lotringer, who had studied in Paris with Roland Barthes and Lucien Goldmann at the École Pratique des Hautes Études and completed his doctoral thesis in 1967 on Virginia Woolf under the direction of Goldmann,[4] decided when he moved to New York to "make himself 'available' to the American artists, because he found their work more concrete than the texts of the Parisian Left-Nietzscheans."[5] For this conference, Lotringer brought together, among others, John Cage, William Burroughs, Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, the latter two who made their first appearance before an American audience.

Infamously, at this event, radical feminists accused them all of being "phallocrats" and Foucault was "accused by the audience of working for the CIA."[6] This accusation against Foucault came during his remarks on the prisons and asylums panel, upon which he was heckled by members of Lyndon Larouche's "Operation Mop Up"—an intensified attack on communists meant to "bury the Nixon-allied Communist Party in six to eight weeks."[7] During this period, Larouche had himself come to be convinced that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) wanted to assassinate him. But why was Foucault heckled? Some might argue that because he was working at the time on his history of sexuality, which contained a theoretical repudiation of the repressive hypothesis—the hecklers' "CIA" was the phantasmatic name for the theoretical critique of repression in the domain of sexuality.[8] This could be amplified by the fact that in the published program for the conference, Foucault was scheduled to deliver a paper titled, "Nous ne sommes pas réprimés" ("We are not Repressed"). But who knows for sure. Who is not repressed? By whom? Theory conspiracies generated by public events like this one often take control of the historical imagination and leave us many years later still shaking our heads in conspiratorial confusion. What we do know is that Foucault concluded that the Schizo-Culture conference "marked the end of the sixties"[9] and that this event, alongside others such as the Sokal hoax[10] three decades later and the Jordan B. Peterson debacle[11] yet another couple of decades further on have, in all their internal differences, contributed to the continuous association between theory and conspiracy.

To add even more fuel to the theory conspiracy fire, we may consider the considerable interest that J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI showed in the activities of the Institute for Social Research. Moreover, there was substantial correspondence between the FBI and Max Horkheimer. And Adorno was compelled to leave the United States because of visa issues shortly before his dispute with Popper.[12] We can also note the significant

interest that the CIA proved to have in culture and theory from the late 1940s onward. Secretly funding the Congress for Cultural Freedom during the 1950s and 1960s, literary, artistic, and cultural efforts during this period inadvertently became co-conspirators in a major agency investment in and stratagem of the cultural dimensions of the Cold War. Founding or sponsoring journals and promoting writers and exhibitions across South America, Europe, Asia, and, to a smaller extent, Africa, the goal was to infiltrate and influence institutions and writers in the struggle against communism. Hannah Arendt, Isaiah Berlin, Daniel Bell, and George Orwell, to mention just a few, literary magazines such as *Encounter* in the United Kingdom which published authors like Aldous Huxley, Bertrand Russell, and Virginia Woolf, and *Preuves*, in France, with contributors such as Lionel Trilling and André Malraux were all in some way, unwittingly, CIA funded. And of course, the communists had their own strategies and schemes that involved culture and theory. Most famously, and over half a century later, it has been proposed that when negotiating her fellowship stipend to study in France in 1965, Julia Kristeva agreed to provide the state security agency of Bulgaria with information about her academic contacts in France, among them Barthes, Goldmann, and Tzvetan Todorov. Though the allegation, promoted by Dimiter Kenarov, has been vigorously denied by Kristeva who while conceding that she, using the code name "Sabina," met with Bulgarian "handlers" in Paris, says that she used them to secure travel documents for her sister and parents, but little else.[13]

And while the topic of clandestine relations between critical theorists and governmental agencies such as the CIA, FBI, and the Bulgarian state security agency certainly provides excellent fuel for (discussions of) theory conspiracy, the recent theory conspiracy regarding Barthes's untimely death after being struck by a laundry truck is perhaps the wildest of them all. In his novel, *La septième fonction du langage* (2015)—*The Seventh Function of Language* (2017)—Laurent Binet makes Barthes' demise not a senseless stroke of bad luck (because of course accidents and coincidences do not exist) but the outcome of a meditated theory conspiracy, with characters and suspects such as Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Umberto Eco and, of course, the "stranger," Kristeva on the cast list. The novel offers a smart and hilarious jest with the intense preoccupation with language and power during the heydays of Theory at the center of which is an invaluable document, possessed by Barthes at the time of his death, containing a theory of the seventh function of language. This theory permits its holder to convert grammar to rhetoric, and thus, in simply using language, to persuade anyone of anything—a motive for murder indeed. The most ironic thing of all here is how the novel has stoked the theory conspiracy fire by furthering the theory of Barthes' non-accidental death. Some readers have obviously failed to recognize Binet's novel as a completely fictional whodunit with a theory

conspiracy plot, proving thereby not only how prone we are to conspiratorial thinking but also, perhaps, how readers with an interest in the heydays of Theory are not necessarily the jaded skeptics that postcritics tend to decry but sometimes quite wondrously naïve in negotiating the admittedly quite precarious borderlines between fiction and reality.

Thus, theory conspiracy from Popper and Adorno to Kristeva and Barthes is strangely familiar to the student of critical theory. From the robust and rigorously argued positivism debates between Popper and the Frankfurt School to the more recent tabloid-grabbing "conspiracies" surrounding theorists such as Kristeva and Barthes, there is plenty of material for scholars to investigate—and for writers to embellish. Nevertheless, the familiarity with theory conspiracy's opposite—conspiracy theory—is even more ubiquitous. Reduced to its essential spectral structure, conspiracy theory accounts for the actions of European nationalists claiming the illicit infiltration of immigrants, QAnon partisans fighting to support Donald Trump's "heroic" Crusades against aliens, and any monotheism that insists that a hidden agent or cause controls the fateful relation between something and nothing. But this volume aims to do something different with conspiracy theory. By deliberately scrambling the syntax—conspiracy theory cum theory conspiracy—it seeks to open a set of reflections on the articulation between theory and conspiracy that addresses how conspiracy might rattle our sense of theory as such.

This, then, is a volume explicitly staged on the ground where conspiracy theory meets theory-as-conspiracy. It considers not only some of the more familiar spaces for such encounters as in the work of Popper, Foucault, Kristeva, and Barthes, but also lesser well-known ones as in the work of Catiline, Cicero, and Baudelaire. In addition, a number of cases are presented as particularly instructive to understanding the grounds where conspiracy theory and theory-as-conspiracy meet. These cases include the January 6, 2021 insurrection in Washington, DC, the politics of the Gilets Jaunes in France, conspiracy comedy in the United States, and the criminal case of Rayyā and Sakīna in Egypt. Moreover, a number of pieces in the volume draw on the recent debate concerning theory in the humanities, one that has an eerie parallel with the debates over positivism involving Popper and the Frankfurt School. This particular debate concerns the role of critique in the humanities, wherein some continue to see the value of theory in its various forms and legacies today, whereas others, so-called *postcritics*, are arguing that these influences have been too strong for too long and need reducing if not retiring. For postcritics, our ways of reading in the humanities have been far too suspicious and far too paranoid for far too long. These postcritique debates have drawn much attention to the present-day humanities in general, a humanities continuously presented as unnecessary at best, and leftist and dangerous at worst.

Part 1 of the present book is entitled "Backgrounds." Opening with "Being Catiline: Sex, Lies, and Coup d'états in the Liberal Order" by Paul Allen Miller, this chapter traces the roots of conspiracy and conspiracy theory in American politics to a story that was once well-known, but today is widely unknown. After Cicero's second victory over Catiline, a descendant from one of the oldest patrician families in Rome, the latter hatched a plan to assassinate Cicero and overthrow the government. When the conspiracy was exposed, a debate took place in the Roman senate as to the fate of the conspirators. Whereas Caesar argued for their arrest, exile, and the confiscation of their goods, Cato the Younger demanded their immediate execution. Cato's argument for a state of exception, which called for the conspirators to be executed without a trial, prevailed, and Cicero led Catiline's supporters to a holding cell where they were all strangled to death with a rope.

According to Miller, the story of the Catilinarian conspiracy "became an object of fascination, dramatization, and debate throughout the modern period." So much so argues Miller that "It developed into an integral part of the way thinkers, politicians, and the general public thought about power, constitutions, the law, the people, violence, and the state of exception." But the ideological positions on Catiline, his conspiracy, and Cicero's theory of the conspiracy in the Enlightenment and the Romantic tradition came to be opposed. Writes Miller,

> Cicero is portrayed as both the defender of a constitutional republic against dark forces plotting murder and revolution and a ruthless *arriviste* who will do anything for power. Catiline is seen as both a decadent aristocrat, bent on exploiting a politics of grievance for personal advancement, and the champion of those who are excluded and exploited by a vicious senatorial elite.

For Miller, these oppositions are significant because they constitute "an image through which the contradictions of republican government could be both embodied and thought." Moreover, because these oppositions are often eroticized, they also reveal sexual fantasy at the core of modern political thought. This is most evident in Thomas Jefferson's substitution of happiness for property in the Declaration of Independence, where Miller sees the move from a notion of "freedom as self-ownership" to a notion of "freedom as the possibility of affective investment and enjoyment." For him, the slippage between these two senses of freedom is "marked by the Catilinarian conspiracy as it was not only imagined but as it was literally embodied by writers, thinkers, artists, and revolutionaries from the beginning of the seventeenth until the middle of the twentieth century." Ultimately, for Miller, "Catiline stands for both the overturning of the constitutional order

and the terror of a longed-for enjoyment." Given Cataline's contradictions, it should come as no surprise that Donald Trump is regarded by Miller as the "perfect postmodern Catiline," that is,

> a fantasy figure of wealth and privilege—golden toilets, limousines, steak every night—but possessed of a vulgarity that is alien to the way traditional privilege understands itself, a coarseness that alienates Trump from *them* and makes him feel like one of *us*.

Effectively, by reflecting on the modern and contemporary political and erotic dimensions of Catilinarian conspiracy, Miller demonstrates how the background of theory conspiracy today is always already haunted by its ancient formations.

The next chapter in this section, Elena Chiti's "Unsettling History: How an Egyptian Conspiracy Theory Turns Time into Place," also builds from a story that is not as widely known as it ought to be—at least not outside of Egypt. The case of the two sisters—Rayyā and Sakīna—who were the first women ever to be sentenced to death under the secular Egyptian justice system (1920–1921), has remained a source of legends, films, theories, and, not least, conspiracy theories ever since. Situating the lure of conspiracy theory in the context of an Arab world characterized by a considerable gap between state and society and in particular in a post Arab-spring world that hungers for revisiting a past previously determined by dominant political narratives, Chiti identifies mechanisms that encourage conspiracy theories as well as mechanisms whereby they are constructed and maintained. Key here, apart from noting how public opinion is mobilized as witness and documentation sufficing as proof also without contextualization, is the way the speed of contemporary media communications systems, that is, "the need for swift history," forces historical knowledge into impossible equations, replacing time and temporality with visiting and reconstructions of historical place.

It has been suggested that the conspiracy theories that spread from below in the Arab world often stem from a gap between state and society.[14] This may result in an attempt of some citizens to deconstruct history beyond official narratives, thus empowering themselves as masters of the interpretation of the past. Chiti's chapter situates the case of Rayyā and Sakīna at the core of conspiracy theories linked to Egyptian history. In recent years, both cultural actors and ordinary citizens have presented conspiracist interpretations of the case, turning the criminal myth into a bandit myth. The common feature of such revisionist attempts, contends Chiti, is a distrust of historical research and written documents. Strong emphasis is put on pictures, yet visual sources deprived of context become a tool to elicit emotional reactions instead of being investigated as

archival pieces. In parallel, bloggers and journalists frantically search for eyewitnesses for a crime committed a century ago. The acknowledgment of the impossibility of finding any, after one century, does not restore the legitimacy of historical research. In their quest for authenticity, these actors switch from time to place. They go visit the Alexandrian district where the crimes once occurred, treating some "elderly people—seventy-year-old men— as truth keepers of a case that was closed before they were even born." Through social media, official media, and fieldwork sources, Chiti investigates what conspiracy theories do to history as a discipline and, ultimately, to its pretention to scientific truth. As such, her chapter is a perfect counterpoint to Miller's chapter, which arguably shows us what the discipline of classics (or, ancient Greek and Roman studies, if you will) does to contemporary conspiracy theories and notions of conspiracy. For Chiti, the Egyptian case of Rayyā and Sakīna

> reveals the tension between two conflicting approaches to the past: one within the limits of documentation, whose outcomes can be constantly challenged; the other guided by a quest for vividness, whose outcomes, in the absence of external checks, give the impression of undisputable certainty.

Chiti concludes that the dissemination of the latter approach to the past, particularly "in times of societal crisis," might be understood as stemming from "the need for stability in unstable times." What *is* certain from both Chiti's and Miller's pieces is that approaching the past in order to understand present-day theory conspiracies is essential.

Just as the case of Rayyā and Sakīna is well-known throughout Egypt, the case of Julia Kristeva's relationship with Bulgarian State Security is well-known in theoretical circles in Europe and the United States. In this section's third chapter, "The Kristeva File," John Mowitt masterfully reflects on the relation between theory and conspiracy by approaching it through a literary theoretical problematic, specifically a sustained reading of Kristeva's detective novel, *Murder in Byzantium* (2004). Motivating this emphasis are the charges in the press mentioned in the beginning of this introduction that Kristeva conspired to commit espionage against the West on behalf of the security services of Bulgaria. *Murder in Byzantium* attends assiduously to the locus of Bulgaria in the geopolitical adventures of the Crusades, adventures that Kristeva mines for their value as the setting for a consideration of the place of "foreigners" in contemporary East/West relations. For Mowitt, Kristeva's own oft-noted status as a "foreigner," especially as grasped in psychoanalytical terms as the Other within, figures in the novel in ways that invite us to hear in the unfamiliar formulation, "theory conspiracy," a suggestive array of connotations, some of which raise evocative questions

both about her difficult relation to Bulgaria and about the agency of theory in the work of conspiracy as emplotted in the literary text.

For Mowitt, the Kristeva file, "a collective assemblage of (d)enunciation articulating state documents, theoretical texts (and Kristeva's theoretical bona fides are beyond reproach), magazine articles, interviews and most emphatically a novel," provides an occasion to demonstrate how a conspiracy theory can itself be theoretical in a rigorous sense, that is, be a true *theory* conspiracy. This is counter-balanced against mere conspiracy theories, which are often nothing more than "grand narratives (to re-purpose one of Jean-François Lyotard's *mots d'art*)" that "draw on affective and literary devices that call for more attention than they typically receive." In short, the Kristeva file offers a unique opportunity "to consider how theory," writes Mowitt, "is at once the object and the subject of conspiracy." In doing so, however, he is also aware of how this methodology might infuriate antitheorists who hate among other things the alleged agency of theory, exemplified in claims regarding theory's ability to "critique" or "change" things. Mowitt links the latter claim in its universal form to Paul de Man, who claimed that theory changes "everything," which was his way of characterizing "the importance of Derrida's *Of Grammatology*." The former claim in its negative form might be linked to postcritique arguments that insist on denying theory's agency regarding critique. But Mowitt adds a new object of resistance to the antitheory crowd by arguing that "theory conspires, or, put differently, that theory achieves its effects through a process that can be provocatively characterized as conspiratorial." His reference to *conspiratorio* recalls a comment from Miller's chapter that the

> history of all hitherto existing democracies, of all western republics, is the history of conspiratorial struggle, a struggle of spirits, of breaths, *conspiratio*, a coming together to create a people, to declare independence, to seize power, to make a revolution, to launch a coup.

Mowitt's *conspiratorio* mediates a further level of depth to this by noting that

> *Conspiratio*, breathing together in the dark, is not typically invoked as a way to describe the act of reading a text, but then again white, first world adolescence is replete with images of readers curled around books reading by flashlight under blankets.

His conclusion is that "if a theory can conspire within and upon the terrain of literary language, then perhaps its relation to conspiracy is not as straightforward as it might otherwise appear." Mowitt's observation holds for both "conspiracy theory as a topical treatment with socio-political

implications" and "theory conspiracy as a weaponization of theoretical reflection."

The fourth and final chapter in this section explores the interconnected theoretical work of Karl Marx, Charles Baudelaire, and Walter Benjamin on conspiracy. In "A Portrait of Baudelaire as a Conspiracy Theorist," Brian O'Keeffe offers a close reading of Benjamin's essay "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire." His main aim is to displace extant readings of that essay by both Benjamin and Baudelaire scholars and propose that, in fact, Benjamin invites us to contemplate an extremely suggestive portrait of Baudelaire as a professional conspirator. That invitation, he demonstrates, is made by way of Benjamin's quotation from a text by Marx in which Marx critiques a caste of bohemians he characterizes as professional conspirators. O'Keeffe offers a reading of Marx's text, and then brings into greater profile Benjamin's linking of Marx and Baudelaire. As he demonstrates, the portrait of Baudelaire as a professional conspirator is remarkably sustained in Benjamin's essay, and it provides a way to re-engage not only with Benjamin's observations on Baudelaire in *The Arcades Project*, but also a way to read Baudelaire's poems with fresh eyes. O'Keeffe's aim here is to show how Baudelaire's mind, and indeed his poetics, was thoroughly imbued with conspiratorial attitudes: exactly the sort of person Marx critiques in his text, and the sort of person, as Benjamin suggests, who could flourish during the conspiratorial-minded Second Empire.

For Marx, professional conspirators are those "who devoted their whole energy to the conspiracy and had their living from it."[15] These professional conspirators came about because of the "development of proletarian conspiracies."[16] However, because these proletarian conspiracies only afford them an uncertain and limited source of income, Marx says that these professional conspirators "are therefore constantly obliged to dip into the cash-boxes of the conspiracy."[17] But as one of the charges of these professional conspirators is to foment revolution, Marx is primarily concerned with the difference between a revolution led by paid professional conspirators versus one led by genuine proletarians. Of these professional conspirators, Marx writes,

> It is precisely their business to anticipate the process of revolutionary development, to bring it artificially to crisis-point, to launch a revolution on the spur of the moment, without the conditions for a revolution. For them the only condition for revolution is the adequate preparation of their conspiracy. They are the alchemists of the revolution and are characterized by exactly the same chaotic thinking and blinkered obsessions as the alchemists of old. They leap at inventions which are supposed to work revolutionary miracles: incendiary bombs, destructive devices of magic effect.[18]

For Marx, the proletariat needs to be purged of these professional conspirators. The problem, though, is that it is difficult to separate true revolution from mere conspiracy. Thus, for O'Keeffe, Benjamin's portrait of Baudelaire as a conspirator both positions him within the Second Empire, which was an environment where conspiracy flourished professionally, and compels us to rethink his reputation as the "poet of modernity, dandified *flâneur*, poetician of evil, devotee of the debased muses of Paris like ragpickers and prostitutes, author of those ambiguous paeans to misery, poverty, alcoholism and dirt." Moreover, O'Keeffe's chapter also obliges us to regard the conditions of modernity as perhaps more beholden to conspiracy and conspiracy theory than has been previously recognized.

If the assemblage of Catiline's supporters strangled to death with a rope, the first women ever to be sentenced to death under the secular Egyptian justice system, the allegation of a major twentieth-century theorist being a secret informant, and a major nineteenth-century poet being a conspirator might be described as the dramatic background for Part 1, then the assemblage of a populist movement that brought France to a halt in 2018, an insurrection at the US Capitol in January of 2021, and a film from 2021 that ends with a comet destroying our planet provides the dramatic tableau for Part 2, entitled "Contemporary."

The first chapter in Part 2, Zahi Zalloua's "Conspiracy and *Ressentiment*: The Vexed Politics of the Gilets Jaunes," takes up the challenge of mobilizing working-class *ressentiment* for a universalist and emancipatory end. He starts by critically considering the problematic politics of the Gilets Jaunes, and how conspiracy and *ressentiment* inform their so-called populist worldview. "Conspiracy theories," comments Zalloua, "satisfy the Gilets Jaunes' existential need for meaning, and speak to their class anxiety by offering them a 'cognitive mapping' of their ever-changing world." For him,

> these theories not only "explain" the predicament of the present by scapegoating minorities, they also produce and impute to the Gilets Jaunes their own subjectivity, which is a kind of a "popular individualism" that weaponizes "personal anger at the new forms of servitude imposed by the dictatorship of Capital today."[19]

Conspiracy in the case of the Gilets Jaunes is "about suspicion, a distrust in the order of things," and for Zalloua, this has significant political implications. "Conspiracy thinking," he writes, "locks the resentful subject or group in a reactionary mode, only capable of generating a state of impotent anger: an anger that destroys without changing the system." To counter this reactionary form of conspiracy, Zalloua argues that we must creatively revisit the Nietzschean concept of *ressentiment* and recast it in its public

and private senses. This is accomplished by Zalloua by revisiting Immanuel Kant's discussion of the private and public uses of reason in his 1784 essay "What Is Enlightenment?" By giving this urtext of universalist thought and Enlightenment rationality a Nietzschean twist, Zalloua is able to recast the Kantian saying—now a Kantian-Nietzschean hybrid—for the purposes of rethinking leftist working-class theory. If the "private use of *ressentiment*" urges the privatization of grievances, which feeds a depoliticized politics of victimhood, reifying the racially excluded in her rage, then, in contrast, the "public use of *ressentiment*" enjoins the racialized Other to universalize her grievances, to see her antagonism as cutting across societies, turning personal trauma into a common cause. This form of *ressentiment* hungers for solidarity, finding no satisfaction in the rewards of identity politics.

Zalloua's efforts here point to the possibility of a leftist conspiracy to counter the overwhelming and destructive power of the many right-wing conspiracy theories out there. The public use of *ressentiment* that he posits is one that is open to universal solidarity. Such *ressentiment* does not emerge from the private sense of personal depravation and result in a depoliticized logic of blame and victimhood but rather recognizes the public and joint injustices that recognize a common cause for a precarity inclusive of white workers and immigrants alike. Instead of, for example, the Great Replacement conspiracy theory, which Zalloua describes as the "absurd conspiracy" that "whites—Christian Europeans—are being replaced by Muslims or immigrants in a plan orchestrated by elite Jews," the possibility of a leftist conspiracy would recognize a logic of a neoliberal capitalism that will never be for them, would be able to slough off the narrow path of identitarianism, and would always be open for a truly different and more egalitarian future. In the final analysis, for Zalloua, these leftist conspiracies "harness the *ressentiment* and anger of the 'becoming wretched'; they infuse politics with an internationalist or cosmopolitan sensibility, expanding, in turn, the meaning and appeal of interest." In sum, leftist conspiracies serve to refocus attention from "economic vulnerability" to "economic antagonisms."

If Zalloua offers a pathway for leftist conspiracy theory to focus attention on economic antagonisms, the next chapter provides a means of identifying forms of domination and hierarchies of power associated with freedom via conspiracy theories. In "Ugly Freedoms and Insurrectionary Conspiracies," Elisabeth R. Anker tells us that the participants in the January 6, 2021 insurrection claimed to be motivated by freedom when they tried to overturn a presidential election. She calls this phenomenon "ugly freedom," that is, a freedom deployed to justify domination and hierarchies of power. Anker contends that ugly freedom enjoys a longstanding position in an American dynamic that has historically employed practices of freedom that produce harm, brutality, and subjugation *as freedom*. This stands in stark opposition

to John Stuart Mill's famous claim that the harm principle is the only limit to freedom, that is, the only legitimate justification to constrain or limit a person's freedom is when one is about to harm another. Through a reading of the language and arguments of the January 6 Insurrectionists, Anker argues that not only do they challenge the presupposition that freedom should be understood as an unproblematic political ideal, but also that "many of these new ugly freedoms are based in conspiracy theories."

According to Anker, conspiracy theories suffuse popular imaginaries of freedom in current US politics. Many of the rioters at the US Capitol in 2021 not only claimed to be motivated by the conspiracy theory of a stolen election but also declared that they were moved to overthrow the election because of "freedom." Their motivations disclose a disturbing trend in American politics, whereby popular interpretations of freedom entail not merely the celebrated values of uncoerced action or rule of law, but also subjugation and oppression underpinned by conspiracy theories. These ugly freedoms, which do not counter domination but enable it, are undergirded by conspiratorial thinking. Ugly freedoms in today's politics—whether describing the Capitol Riot, or justifying banning books and refusing vaccines, or punishing teachers who focus on race and sexuality in the classroom—rely on conspiracy theories of overwhelming subterranean power out to dismantle traditional American values in order to justify the domination they practice under freedom's name. For Anker, while US history since its birth has involved ugly freedoms, it has become increasingly clear how conspiracy theories have enabled such freedoms. The conspiracy theory about the 2020 election being stolen is a case in point as it requires a double vision, a vision that simultaneously rejects the power of state control and demands such power and control for itself. Only the view that sexual, racial, and social equalities constitute a nefarious threat to American freedom makes possible the claim to a freedom that relies on the oppression of such equalities. Only by claiming that democratic domination is corrupt emerges "freedom as entitled domination." Writing part of her chapter at her local pizza parlor in Washington, DC, which happens to be the venue for the Pizzagate conspiracy theory and its tragic results during the election campaign in 2016, Anker points to the seemingly inextricable relations between power and conspiracy theory in the twenty-first century.

The third and final chapter in Part 2, "Don't Look Up, Birds Aren't Real: Comedy and Conspiracy" by Sophia A. McClennen begins by suggesting that Popper's understanding of conspiracy theories is reductive and ill-equipped to account for the current complex state of conspiracies where it is often the case that the conspirator is also the conspiracy theorist. Instead, she suggests that what we actually need to make sense of conspiracy theorizing today is attention to irony, with particular attention to the productive ways that satirical irony can reveal situational ironies. To that

end, McClennen looks at three examples of "satirical irony working to reveal ironic conspiracies, each of which expose different angles to current conspiratorial conspiracy theorizing." The first concerns Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show*, which, by utilizing satirical irony, "was effective at exposing the ironies of a news mediascape that depended on manufacturing conspiracies and distributing disinformation rather than informing the public." The second example she finds in director Adam McKay's *Don't Look Up* (2021), a satirical comedy that "reveals not only the irony that climate scientists aren't trusted to communicate the truth about the climate, but also the even more disturbing irony that climate science conspiracy theories are trusted more in certain circles." The third sample is located in "The Birds Aren't Real" movement, which "has used a parody conspiracy theory to expose absurdity through absurdity for an entire generation of young people who were literally raised on conspiracies."

By arguing that Popper's famous framework for understanding conspiracy and conspiracy theory is not applicable in a contemporaneity that spins on frequently bizarre and increasingly powerful conspiracy theories, McClennen shows that pointing out the truth or presenting facts are insufficient tools for undermining conspiracies as they too become sucked up in the twisted logic of conspiracy theorists and thus themselves come to be regarded as part of a conspiracy. Underscoring this ironic dimension of conspiracy theories, McClennen notes that many are happy to trust authority, but only if that authority has positioned other authorities as conspiracies, that is, has "institutionalize[d] that distrust through a trust in only itself." McClennen's proposal that satirical commentary, dark comedy, and situationist parody provide better tools for revealing and critiquing the realities of conspiracy theory and its impact in the twenty-first century is, of course, in itself ironic, as news satire today provides people with more correct news than the regular news. For McClennen, "in the case of ironic engagement with conspiracy the intents, purposes and effects of disguise and communication begin from the premise that the conspiratorial conspiracy theory itself is designed to be a disarming, disguised, mode of toxic communication." "Understood in this way," she concludes, "creatively ironic communication is not held in opposition to sincere, literal communication, but rather the opposition is best understood in terms of communication intent to deceive and communication creatively designed to use irony to reveal such deceptions." Ultimately, for her, "the only way to make sense of something that doesn't make sense is by not trying to make sense"—a conclusion which echoes to the imperatively entitled Talking Heads documentary film, *Stop Making Sense* (1984).

McClennen's proposal that "the only way to make sense of something that doesn't make sense is by not trying to make sense" is also a statement about the function and role of criticism and critique when faced with a

world now replete with conspiracy and conspiracy theory. Part 3, entitled "Critical," is a group of chapters that examine the various challenges and opportunities for critical theory regarding conspiracy and paranoia in the twenty-first century. Moreover, these chapters are also concerned with the future of theory within the humanities in an increasingly conspiratorial and paranoid environment.

The first chapter in Part 3 is Clare Birchall and Peter Knight's "Has Conspiracy Theory Run Out of Steam?" Here Birchall and Knight reassess the critique of critique, specifically the relationship between critique and conspiracy theory, in light of recent political, technological, and epistemic developments. They focus on the way that conspiracy theory comes to serve as a straw man in certain arguments against the hermeneutics of suspicion, the assertion made by Paul Ricoeur that Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Friedrich Nietzsche each advocate a "hermeneutics of suspicion" because "all three begin with suspicion concerning the illusions of consciousness, and then proceed to employ the stratagem of deciphering."[20] Pausing on these metaphorical mobilizations of conspiracy theory, Birchall and Knight ask what difference it makes to the discussion about critique if we take on board the manifestation, mediation, and meaning of conspiracy theories in circulation today.

The title of their chapter is, of course, a play on Bruno Latour's "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern" (2004), a central essay in the postcritique canon that likens social critique to conspiracism. "What's the real difference," asks Latour, "between conspiracists and a popularized, that is a teachable version of social critique inspired by a too quick reading of … a sociologist…?" For him, there is "something troublingly similar in the structure of the explanation, in the first movement of disbelief and, then, in the wheeling of causal explanations coming out of the deep dark below."[21] Birchall and Knight directly address the postcritique debate centered on the work of Latour and Rita Felski, particularly on the way its central proponents worry that critique has helped fuel conspiracy theories and post-truth discourse in the twenty-first century. Building their reasoning around the seemingly counterintuitive argument that it is conspiracy theory that has run out of steam, rather than critique, they show how conspiracy theories used to have more similarities to critique in the past than they do now. Where conspiracy theory à la Popper, for example, built on elaborate mappings, convictions, and goals and on vehemently looking for proofs and evidence, conspiracy theory today tends, rather to miss out on the theory part, focusing, instead, on empty gestures and repetitions, having little interest in the proof and evidence business. This makes contemporary conspiracy less like critique and more like something that we actually need to critique, that is, "we need to engage in ideological critique of conspiracy theories—to read them symptomatically." In trying to

do so, however, it is illuminated that one goal that conspiracy theory today really does seem to have is to undermine any critique as "Cultural Marxism" or "fake news."

The next chapter, Frida Beckman's "A Reparative Chronotope of Critique," builds from the observation that in the twenty-first century, theory is increasingly identified as having its foundations in a certain form of paranoia. From Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick through Latour to Felski and the field of "postcritique," the hermeneutics of suspicion as well as poststructural theories of power such as Foucault's are identified as paranoid and insufficient if not detrimental in dealing with the present. But Beckman wonders why and how these theories have been identified as paranoid. From what implicit postulations about the subject does postcritique take off? In this chapter, Beckman explores the deeper continuities and discontinuities between theory, paranoia, and conspiracy by first revisiting Sedgwick's seminal article about paranoid and reparative reading, and second by engaging Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope. In her recent study, *The Paranoid Chronotope* (2022), Beckman developed the concept of a paranoid chronotope as a way to get at the complexities of how to interpret and critique contemporary society and culture. In essence, the paranoid chronotope is a doubled one. In it, an everyday space-time is "exposed" as fake by a paranoid subject or group who complements this space-time with an additional space-time, one that is seen as true reality. Nevertheless, in this chapter, Beckman flips her own conception of a paranoid chronotope by marrying it to Sedgwick's work also on the reparative mode, which allows her to approach theory from the perspective of a reparative chronotope. According to Beckman, it is not at all self-evident that critical theory relies on paranoia. On the contrary, there are many ways in which we can see it rather as reparative.

For Beckman, then, a central question is whether Theory with a capital T and Critique with a capital C have really been characterized by the paranoia that they have been ascribed in recent debates. And if so, then, how useful is such a characterization? To answer this question, Beckman revisits three key theories within these traditions: Kantian critique, Ricoeurian hermeneutics of suspicion, and Foucauldian theories of power, to suggest that what is really at the bases of all these modes of thought is precisely a reparative mode. Each of these traditions builds on an acceptance of the flaws and faultiness of life and thought that is unacceptable to a paranoid logic. Rather, Beckman argues, such acceptance belongs to a reparative mode, which, as Sedgwick has shown, enables not only a more balanced and depressive, but also generative position. In sum, "we have very little to gain from inscribing critique into contemporary tendencies toward paranoia and conspiracy," writes Beckman. "It is a powerful but crippling resemblance," she continues, "one that is now also frequently evoked by right-wing and post-truth forces." For her, the "continuous vacillation of and in critique,

the hermeneutics of suspicion, and Theory between positions that recognize alertness and suspicion" is something that "ultimately strives toward the reparative." In sum, Beckman is not offering that critique needs to be rethought or reconfigured, but rather that we recognize the extant reparative dimensions of critique.

In "Conspiring with Theory: Popper, Antitheory, and the Epistemology of Ignorance," which is the third chapter in this section, Jeffrey R. Di Leo argues that "the open society of Popper is one that is closed to theory." The conspiracy theory of theory, which is part of the framework of the open society, maintains that "the open society must reject any and all theory that cannot be falsified." This means that much of what contemporary thought describes as critique has no place in Popper's conception of an open society. Included in this category, for example, is theoretical work on intersectional issues such as race, class, gender, disability, and sexuality. Why? Because none of these theoretically revolutionary theories can be falsified. Also included here, writes Di Leo, are "theoretical efforts to elevate and make space for the voices and issues of those who are marginalized, discriminated against, or subject to violence." Why? Because they are viewed in Popper's open society "as a conspiracy by theory to end the static rule of falsifiable epistemology." In this chapter, Di Leo revisits the epistemological and social science vision of Popper, which, through the philanthropy of George Soros, has come to be associated today with the Open Society Foundations and the Central European University (CEU)—itself, of course, a major target for contemporary conspiracy theories. For Di Leo, the central question that must be asked "is whether the legacies of Popper that conspire *against* theory for the betterment of the world achieve their aim—or whether conspiring with theory is at the present moment a surer path to improving the world?" Given that 32 billion dollars have been put into the Open Society Foundations initiative since 1984, "the legacy of Popper could very well be the most well-funded version of antitheory in history."[22] "While many in literary and cultural theory," continues Di Leo, "including myself, have focused their attention on the several million that Felski got to fund her own version of antitheory, the philanthropic work of Soros and company makes the financial backing for postcritique look like penny candy."

By tracing the intellectual development of Popper and his influence on major contemporary intellectual and didactic investments such as George Soros' CEU, Di Leo shows how Popper lays the groundwork of antitheory and postcritique debates of the present. Situating these latter-day phenomena in this historical and theoretical context, he argues that Popperian conceptions about truth and falsifiability have contributed to, rather than protected us from, conspiracy theories of theory. Playing with the idea of an alternative universe, in which Soros was a student of Bergson rather than Popper, Di Leo

envisions a different society, one in which a critical theory tradition is not targeted as akin to and fueling contemporary conspiracy theories but, quite to the contrary, is seen as a viable way of building a better world. "Popper regarded philosophy as the source of conspiracy theory," writes Di Leo, "or at least modern epistemology through the mid-twentieth century." As used by him, conspiracy "was something that is negative and to be avoided in open societies." But, as Di Leo points out, "conspiracy also can also have a positive connotation in the sense of working or acting together." He argues that this is how we should regard the use of critical theory in society today, that is, "by working together with theory we are working toward building a better world."

The final chapter in this section and thus in the volume as a whole is Timothy Melley's "A Sketch of Conspiratorial Reason." According to Melley, "conspiracy theory" is not only widely understood as a result of faulty or disordered reasoning, but it is also a symptom of the conditions of knowledge in contemporary society. In the postwar United States, these conditions include growing institutional secrecy and a florid cultural imaginary that relentlessly represents institutional deception and malfeasance in news, social media, and popular narrative. For Melley, these two factors are mutually reinforcing; institutional secrecy fuels the production of suspicion and cynical representations. These representations in turn powerfully influence popular belief in conspiracies in two ways: first, through the reiteration of general assumptions about the dysfunction of the democratic public sphere; and second, through the depiction of particular types of conspiratorial plotting. Despite their extraordinary popularity, the narratives of the conspiracy imaginary are, notes Melley, surprisingly formulaic. They rehash variations on several forms of institutional corruption. As they do so, they romanticize conspiratorial reason, depicting it as an ethical and heroic response to illegitimate power. Conspiracy melodramas cast the work of revelation as a thrilling form of citizenship in which the good citizen pursues anomalies in the official record, discovers terrible secrets, and heals the ailing public sphere by revealing corruption to the public. In so doing, conspiracy fiction models the sort of anti-authoritarian heroism that appeals to the conspiracy theorist. According to Melley, Donald Trump's political success in large part has stemmed from his mastery of these tropes.

Melley's chapter problematizes what tends to be an oversimplified assessment of conspiracy theory as being simply outrageous, and easily and scornfully rejected. Showing how a conspiratorial reason tends to touch on real contemporary problems of for example disinformation, hidden types of law enforcement, and corporate surveillance, and making use of his extensive knowledge of conspiracy fiction from the last decades to show how such reason is continually "scripted" by fiction, Melley argues that conspiracy reason should be taken seriously. Unlike cynical reason, which

also proliferates today, and which "knows it all" but has become resigned to deception, the outrage of conspiratorial reason nurtures a "public sphere heroism" that, like its fictional counterpart, promises to reveal the big secrets and eventually gain the well-deserved recognition of the people. Writes Melley,

> Cynical reason is *resigned* to deception. Conspiratorial reason is not; it is nostalgic for a lost ideal of the public sphere and it expresses quixotic rage at public deception. Faced with the ruses of power, the cynic shrugs: "of course things are this way, but what can we do?" The conspiracist, by contrast, is outraged—"outraged, I tell you!"—and bent on waking the rest of us from our mystified slumber.

Thus, and even if most are able to make a distinction between reality and fiction, what might be reasonable or at least partly reasonable grounding assumptions in a critique of society are "glued" together into fantastic revelatory melodramas. The outcome is nothing but the conditions of knowledge in contemporary society, conditions from which the step to authoritarian accusations or stolen elections and deep state plots really isn't that big.

In conclusion, and before proudly leaving the floor to these exciting scholars and chapters, we want to emphasize the fact that theory conspiracy offers not just descriptions of conspiracies and conspiracy theories, but also meta-reflections on them that provide new concepts such as McClennen's "satirical irony" and Beckman's "reparative chronotope" for unlocking conspiracy and conspiracy theory's domination over social and political life. Theory conspiracy also pushes the reevaluation of shopworn concepts like critique, paranoia, ressentiment, and reason, and forgotten ones such as Catilinarian conspiracy in view of their contemporary variations in conspiratorial thought.

While cases involving spies, FBI, and the CIA might be the public and indelible image of theory conspiracy, its scholarly and intellectual dimensions involve nothing less than rigorous reflection on the conditions and future of theory in an increasingly conspiratorial world. Such serious reflection also has the potential to pull Theory with a big T out of the dog house of the humanities by making it an agent—in the full sense described by Mowitt—of *conspiratio*. If, as Mowitt argues, "theory achieves its effects through a process that can be provocatively characterized as conspiratorial," then it is not much of a reach to suggest that Theory with a big T must conspire if it is to have any chance of impact and relevancy for the humanities. To be sure, there are both progressive and reactionary ways to conspire. As theorists who conspire, our charge is less to gather privately in dark corners and plot hidden agendas—than to breathe together publicly.

Notes

1 Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945), two vols., fifth edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), II: 95.
2 Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, II: 95.
3 See Jeffrey R. Di Leo's contribution to this volume, "Conspiring with Theory: Popper, Antitheory, and the Epistemology of Ignorance," particularly section two, for an overview of Popper's conspiracy theory of society.
4 "Sylvère Lotringer (1938–2021)," Department of French, Columbia University. https://french.columbia.edu/content/sylvere-lotringer-1938-2021
5 Philipp Felsch, *The Summer of Theory: History of a Rebellion, 1960–1990*, trans. Tony Crawford (Medford: Polity Press, 2022), 155.
6 Philipp Felsch, *The Summer of Theory*, 155.
7 John Mintz, "Ideological Odyssey: From Old Left to Far Right," *Washington Post*. January 14, 1985. www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/longterm/cult/larouche/main.htm
8 This observation was made by John Mowitt in some unpublished notes on theory conspiracy theory.
9 Philipp Felsch, *The Summer of Theory*, 155.
10 Alan Sokal, a professor of physics at New York University, submitted an article to the theory-driven journal *Social Text* in 1996 that intended to test the intellectual rigor of the journal. The article, "Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity," was published in the journal the same year. After its publication, Sokal publicly stated that his article was a hoax.
11 Peterson, then a psychology professor at the University of Toronto, protested against Bill C-16, which proposed to add gender identity and orientation as protected classes within the Canadian Human Rights act. The bill made it illegal to discriminate against someone in the workplace on the basis of the gender with which they identify or outwardly express. By characterizing his position as grounded in freedom of speech, Peterson's protests contributed to hateful acts and confusion about trans- and non-binary people.
12 See, David Jenneman, *Adorno in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
13 See Dimiter Kenarov, "Was the Philosopher Julia Kristeva a Cold War Collaborator?" *The New Yorker*, September 5, 2018. See also, John Mowitt's contribution to this volume, "The Kristeva File," for a detailed analysis of Kristeva with respect to the theoretical nature of this particular conspiracy theory.
14 Matthew Gray, *Conspiracy Theories in the Arab World* (New York: Routledge, 2010).
15 Karl Marx, "*Les Conspirateurs*, par A. Chenu, ex-capitaine des gardes du citoyen Caussidière. Les sociétés secrètes; la préfecture de police sous Caussidière; les corps-francs. *La Naissance de la Republique en février 1848*, par Lucien de la Hodde," in *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels Collected Works*, vol. 10, trans. Christopher Upward (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 316.
16 Karl Marx, "*Les Conspirateurs*," 316.
17 Karl Marx, "*Les Conspirateurs*," 317.
18 Karl Marx, "*Les Conspirateurs*," 318.
19 Zalloua is quoting here Alain Badiou, "Lessons from the 'Yellow Vests' Movement," trans. Gregory Elliott, *Verso Books*, May 21, 2019. www.versobooks.com/blogs/4327-alain-badiou-lessons-of-the-yellow-vests-movement
20 Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 34.

21 Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry*, 30, no. 2 (2004): 228–229.
22 For accounts of antitheory and its relationship to theory, see *What's Wrong with Antitheory?*, ed. Jeffrey R. Di Leo (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

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PART 1

Background

1

BEING CATILINE

Sex, Lies, and Coup d'états in the Liberal Order

Paul Allen Miller

There is a specter haunting democracy: the grimace of its own reflection. The history of all hitherto existing democracies, of all Western republics, is the history of conspiratorial struggle, a struggle of spirits, of breaths, *conspiratio*, a coming together to create a people, to declare independence, to seize power, to make a revolution, to launch a coup, *e pluribus unum*. Our breaths moving together, as one, often in darkness, in secret, rising and falling with the adrenaline of fright, rebellion, orgiastic violence. The ghost of the Catilinarian conspiracy haunts the foundations of modern liberal democracy in the writings of Montesquieu and Voltaire, John Adams and Alexander Hamilton.[1] Its image is ubiquitous among the modern apostles of both Cicero and Caesar. It functions as democracy's unconscious, the repressed voice of the other. It is the image of our obscene enjoyment as surely as Donald Trump's leer, the deep hue of Marine Le Pen's *bleue marine*, and the exploding bomb. It is part of republican democracy's DNA, a deep lineage that both promises to be and threatens its future, the glistening underbelly of paroxystic *jouissance*—what Jason Frank has labeled the democratic sublime[2]—haunting the cool rationality of the neoliberal board room and its discontents: the imaginary other of our reflection.

   This contradictory image, I am trying to describe, both was and is an actual conspiracy and a conspiracy theory. It both was and is a widely shared sexual fantasy, and an abomination of violence, rape, and pedophilia that must be stopped. It is both founded on lies, conjecture, and misinformation, and yet oddly true. It is the overturning of the constitutional order by ruthless and unaccountable elites, and the voice of the people, of the *demos* who finally wields its power (*krateia*). It is the revendication of our self-evident rights to

life, liberty, and the pursuit of pleasure, and it is the death drive unleashed. And throughout most of the history of Western democratic consciousness, a consciousness that the authority of governing must derive in some form from the consent of the governed, that specter's name has been, Lucius Sergius Catilina, the leader of the Catilinarian conspiracy.

One

In 63 BCE, Marcus Tullius Cicero, a new man from the provincial town of Arpinum was elected one of the two yearly consuls of Rome. Cicero had reached the pinnacle of Roman political power without the long list of consular ancestors or deep aristocratic connections possessed by most senatorial families in Rome. Catiline was one of his defeated opponents. He was descended from one of the oldest patrician families in Rome. In 62 BCE, when Catiline ran again and again was defeated, he gathered about him a group of conspirators, many from the lower classes, the landless, the indebted, as well as fellow aristocrats down on their luck. They launched a plan to assassinate Cicero and overthrow the government, setting fires throughout the city. The conspiracy was exposed first in the senate and then before the Roman people by Cicero in a series of famous speeches known as the Catilinarians.

After the first of these, Catiline fled to join his armed followers waiting in the hills. There he later died bravely (if not perhaps heroically) in battle. When he had departed the city, he left many followers still in Rome. The existence of this nest of conspirators, who threatened to slit the throats of the leading senators in the night, led to a lively debate in the senate on what should be done. Caesar, although suspected of harboring sympathies for the Catilinarian cause, argued for their arrest, exile, and the confiscation of their goods, but Cato the Younger, who later disemboweled himself rather than submit to Caesarian rule, demanded immediate execution, contending the danger was too immediate to permit delay. In the words of Condoleezza Rice, "We don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud."[3] Putting to death a Roman citizen without a trial before the people, however, was clearly against the law. Cato's argument was for a state of exception, known as a *senatus consultum ultimum*.[4] Indeed, there was a significant fear that since one of the promises the conspirators had made was the cancelation of debts, the people might be inclined to acquit them.[5] Cato like Condi won the day, and Catiline's supporters, all of senatorial rank, were led by Cicero to the *carcer*, the small holding cell on the Capitoline, where they were strangled with a rope in the traditional manner.

The senate had declared martial law. Cicero was hailed "Pater Patriae," "Father of his Country."[6] Four years later, he was prosecuted for these extrajudicial killings by his archnemesis, the populist tribune of the people

Publius Clodius Pulcher, and was sent into exile. His house was razed, and a Temple of Liberty built on its grounds, before his eventual recall. More than a few historians date the beginning of the death throes of the Roman Republic, the world's longest experiment in representative government, to this period. It was at this same time that Caesar, Pompey the Great, and the richest man in Rome, Marcus Licinius Crassus, made a political alliance, known as the first triumvirate, to divide power and subvert the norms of the *res publica*.

Today this is a story that few who are not professional classicists know. But it is one of the best documented political events in the ancient world, and a hundred years ago there was not an educated person in Europe, the Americas, and many parts of the colonized world who did not know it in detail.[7] Not only do we have Cicero's speeches and his numerous later reflections in his correspondence and theoretical works, but we also have versions of the speeches of Caesar and Cato preserved in Sallust's monograph on the Catilinarian war, as well as full accounts in Plutarch's *Lives* of Cicero, Caesar, and Cato, and numerous other mentions throughout the ancient world.

Far more importantly for my argument, though, the Catilinarian conspiracy became an object of fascination, dramatization, and debate throughout the modern period. It developed into an integral part of the way thinkers, politicians, and the general public thought about power, constitutions, the law, the people, violence, and the state of exception. It became "a figurative or imaginative core" of our "social representation."[8] And throughout that history, this imaginative core is eroticized and invested with the power of enjoyment. Law and its transgression, democracy and revolution, constitutional power and extrajudicial murder are made the objects of passion and lust. This conspiracy, which was seldom discussed in the Middle Ages, became one of the paradigmatic images through which ideologies of what it meant to be a republic and how we are to understand its perversions were articulated across the ideological spectrum.[9] We see it everywhere, from Ben Jonson's (1611) *Catiline His Conspiracy*,[10] passages from which Thomas Jefferson copied into his daybook, to Ibsen's *Catiline*, his first play, written in support of the Magyar revolt against the Austro-Hungarian empire, to Cesare Maccari's famed 1888 fresco, *Cicerone denuncia Catalina*, in the seat of the Italian senate, to Aleksandr Blok's 1918 essay, "Catiline," shortly after the Russian revolution.[11]

Cicero's *Catilinarians* were, in fact, a standard part of the British and American grammar school curriculum, which every young man and not a few young women would have read, and we shall turn to the speeches shortly. John Adams as a young student at Harvard would recite Cicero's speeches aloud in his room at night and later insisted that John Quincy translate the first *Catilinarian* as they sailed to France to join Benjamin Franklin in

seeking an alliance with the French.[12] The phenomenon was hardly limited to the colonial context. In France, Crébillon (père) had his *Catalina* performed at court in 1748 to great success. It offered a sympathetic portrait of the rebel aristocrat and portrayed Cicero as a cowardly, vain consul who abused his power, murdered his citizens, and tried to marry his own daughter to the noble Catiline.[13] It was answered by Voltaire's *Rome Sauvée ou Catalina*, in which Cicero is the virtuous defender of the Republic against a villain who betrayed his own wife and murdered his father-in-law.[14] Voltaire was so fond of the play that he had it performed on his private stage, where he often assumed the role of Cicero himself. In 1762, Rousseau's *Social Contract* paints the portrait of a brilliant but vain consul "who preferred his own glory to his country's good" (4.6.10).[15] In 1792, Antonio Salieri wrote his mock-heroic opera *Catalina*. This was followed in 1844 by Prosper Mérimée's, *Conjuration de Catilina*, a historical account that concludes it was, in fact, Cicero who used violence and intimidation to cow the senate and allow executions without appeal.[16]

As we see in these examples, Catiline, his conspiracy, and Cicero's theory of that conspiracy had the power to occupy opposed ideological positions in the Enlightenment and Romantic imagination. Cicero is portrayed as both the defender of a constitutional republic against dark forces plotting murder and revolution and a ruthless *arriviste* who will do anything for power. Catiline is seen as both a decadent aristocrat, bent on exploiting a politics of grievance for personal advancement, and the champion of those who are excluded and exploited by a vicious senatorial elite.

How these complicated characters map on to the political situation of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is equally complex. We often see both sides of a conflict understood through the prism of the conspiracy and its intense affective charge. Thus, while John Adams is overseeing his son's translation of the first *Catilinarian* as an object lesson in republican patriotism, Joseph Galloway, the former Torie governor of Philadelphia pens *Letters from Cicero to the Second Catiline*, a series of blistering "neoclassical denunciations" of the colonies' fickle loyalists.[17] Galloway claims that Cicero's true heirs were those who remained loyal to the ancient constitution and the traditions of British freedom, not demagogues like Catiline and Adams who sought to commit treason.

By the 1790s, with the American Revolution won, political opposition in general came to be referred to as Catilinism, and Alexander Hamilton adopted the persona of the consul to rail against the leaders of the Whiskey rebellion as "latter-day Catilines." This was a term he, Adams, and Jefferson used for Aaron Burr. Similar rhetoric is found in France after the revolution in 1789 and it continued to be deployed across Europe until the early twentieth century.[18] Recently, William Altman has argued that you can trace certain ancient historians' alignment for or against German militarism before the

First World War and later Nazism by where they line up in the debate over Cicero's execution of the conspirators versus Caesar's plea for their lives.[19]

Two

If Catiline and his conspiracy constituted an image through which the contradictions of republican government could be both embodied and thought—its simultaneous predication on and opposition to extrajudicial violence, its simultaneous predication on and opposition to democratic power, its simultaneous predication on and opposition to constitutional norms—the question then arises why did this image have such power? What led it to be a privileged means of giving imaginative shape to and of promoting psychic investment in the articulation of a republican political ethos and its betrayal, whether in the person of Adams bellowing Cicero in his rooms in Cambridge or Voltaire playing him on a stage in France? We should note at this juncture that these are all bodily experiences. It is not just the idea of Catiline that is in question, but in a real sense, it is being Catiline. What we need to understand is, that just as QAnon has become the site for the eroticization and anathematization of elitist sexual fantasies, just as Trump rallied followers for his anti-immigration crusade through the deployment of rape fantasies of women duct-taped in the trunks of cars, just as the Klan itself was founded to protect white womanhood, each of these phenomena being both a conspiracy and a conspiracy theory that clothed itself—quite literally sometimes—in the garb of the republic, seeking to overturn it in order to preserve it, so this same eroticization of the republican body politic was present from the beginning in the story of Catiline and those who shared his spirit. Moreover, this erotic aspect was not even repressed. It was a feature, not a bug. It was often limned in loving detail. Edward Wortley Montagu in his (1759) *Reflections on the Rise and Fall of the Antient Republicks* sees in "the conspiracies of Catiline and Caesar" the decay of the republic, whose symptoms were "luxury, effeminacy and corruption." "Corruption was arrived at its last stage and the depravity was universal."[20] In what remains, I will turn to the depiction of Catiline and his conspiracy in the ancient sources with which the writers, artists, and political theorists of the bourgeois revolutions identified so strongly. I close by examining how those same elements can be seen in the populist conspiracies and conspiracy theories we live with and imagine today.

From the opening of Cicero's first *Catilinarian*, we are invited to imagine, participate in, and then repulse a conjury of orgiastic frenzy and decadence. "How far, I ask you, Catiline, do you mean to stretch our patience? How much longer will your frenzy [*furor*] continue to frustrate us?" (1.1).[21] *Furor* is a loaded word. In Vergil's *Aeneid*, it implies at once the dangerous individualistic heroism of the Greek hero, an Ajax or an Achilles, rather than

the dutiful submission of a *pius Aeneas*, and the mad sexuality of a Dido or of Pasiphae's illicit passion for the bull.[22] It is both heroic, if problematic, and deeply perverse.

Such a frenzy is not limited to a single individual. That would not be a matter for the senate. Rather it is characteristic of the moment, a sign of broader social decline and depravity—"o tempora, o mores" "What a decadent age we live in," Berry translates (*In Catilinam* 1.2).[23] This *furor* is a contagion. It spreads from spirit to spirit among those who breathe together in the dark.

There follows a section in which Cicero says he could, but will not, seek Catiline's immediate death, citing past instances of summary executions, including when a senatorial gang beat Tiberius Gracchus and 300 of his followers to death after the tribune had passed a law giving public lands occupied by aristocratic families to the poor. This is one of the first indications of what the real stakes are. Catiline does not simply seek power. He wants a revolution. Why, then, does Cicero hold back? Because, while, like any good conspiracy theorist, he feels he has overwhelming evidence, he also recognizes it may not be convincing to everyone, and so he will wait for Catiline to confirm the existence of the conspiracy by his flight (1.12).

There is a moment of epistemological failure or aporia that every conspiracy theory seeks to remedy.[24] This is the *raison d'être* for such theories, even those shown to be true. Conspiracy theories, by definition, tell us what we do not know, what is hiding in the dark. Nature abhors a vacuum and, recognizing this, Cicero fills the epistemic gap with a stunning *praeteritio*: a rhetorical device in which the speaker lists a series of topics he will not discuss, even as he introduces them. The *praeteritio* offers the perfect combination of character assassination and plausible deniability for any would-be conspiracy theorist who aspires to reveal the enormity of his foe's crimes without offering actual evidence. Cicero continues:

> From what lust [*libido*] have your eyes, from what crime have your hands ever abstained, from what outrage has any part of your body ever abstained? Is there any youth that you have not ensnared with the enticements of corruption whom you have not then gone on to provide with a weapon to commit crime or a torch to fire his lusts? Or again, when you recently made your house ready for a new bride by bringing about the death of your previous wife, did you not compound this crime with yet another that is quite incredible? But I will pass over this and let it be veiled in silence, because I do not want such a monstrous crime to appear either to have been committed in our country, or to have been committed and not punished. I will also pass over the financial ruin which you will find hanging over you on the 13th of this month [when loans came due].
>
> *(1.1.13–14)*[25]

This is a brilliant and vicious little piece of invective. We should imagine it acted out upon the stages and in the minds of Enlightenment Europe and revolutionary America. The passage begins with Catiline's *libido*. While the word does not have the precise Freudian gloss it will later possess, it strongly connotes desire and illicit pleasures. We are invited to imagine what Catiline's eyes lust to gaze upon. Is he a voyeur? Does he like to watch? Or does he also like to touch with his hands? How does his sight relate to his lust and his hands? What does he do with the other parts of his body? Does he stick them places? Does he have things stuck in them? Or perhaps he performs unimaginable acts? All of these questions are immediately posed by the first lines of this passage.

As we continue reading, it seems he likes boys. He traps them, literally throws a net over them (*inretire*), having lured them with charms and decoys (*inlecibrae*), as one would do with a bird or small animal. What does he do with these pets once he ensnares them? He gives them a sword so they can cut throats and purses, or he fires their lust with a torch. In this one sentence, we move from seduction to murder and back again, creating a unity of violence and perversion that are at the core of our imagination of Catiline's conspiracy and his crimes.

We slide then from murders committed by the boys, whom Catiline entraps with his wiles, to the murder of his previous wife as we travel along the same associative chain of sexualized violence. As commentators have observed, there is no evidence that Catiline committed this murder or the other one Cicero hints at darkly.[26] But we will not talk about this. Cicero's sense of shame forbids him mentioning what he is mentioning. In a classic move, the existence of evidence of dastardly crimes is hinted at but then pudically withdrawn, "I will pass over this." The *praeteritio* is a kind of tease, a way of luring with charms and decoys, that leads us deeper into the associative labyrinth, deeper into a world of imaginary enjoyment that we simultaneously hold at a distance. We are able both to be Catiline and judge Catiline. And we won't even talk about how much money he owes! Roman morality strongly associated sexual and monetary continence,[27] as did Montagu in his condemnation of "luxury, effeminacy, and corruption."

Examples could be multiplied from the speech. The entire oration proceeds in much the same manner. Let us turn our attention, however, to the Second Catilinarian. This is a speech delivered to the people of Rome. The senate has met, and Catiline has fled. The consul now explains his actions to the people of Rome in an oration given from the rostrum in the Forum. Cicero again begins by explaining why he had to be careful and could not simply execute Catiline, since not everyone accepted his theory of the conspiracy.

But at that time not even all of you were sufficiently convinced of the existence of the conspiracy. I saw that if I punished him with the death

> he deserved, I would make myself so unpopular that I would not be in a position to take action against his accomplices.
>
> *(2.4)*[28]

There remains an epistemic gap. Cicero again fills it less with evidence than fantasy and invective. This would have been a typical and expected part of ancient Roman oratory, but it is equally part of the Enlightenment fantasy of political reason, of Adams, Voltaire, Hamilton, and Salieri imagining themselves to be Cicero and accusing others of being Catiline. Cicero proceeds to list the reasons we should fear Catiline and hence why the Roman people should support their consul. He first mentions that Catiline took with him a certain Tongilius, who had long been the object of Catiline's affections (2.4), as well as certain other garden-variety wastrels. But Catiline, he says, had behind left many powerful, indebted, and debauched young men whom we should fear more, "young men gleaming with lotions" (2.5).[29] "What debts they have, what power, what noble birth!" (2.4).[30] The cluster of ideas associating scandalous forms of enjoyment with debt, violence, and revolution continues throughout, as it did in the first *Catilinarian*. But Cicero makes a division here. While he comes before the people as the defender of the constitutional order and thus as a senator and member of the elite, he does so also as a new man, as one who, like those whom he addresses, has no long line of aristocratic ancestors and inherited wealth. These well-moisturized young men are those we should fear, these dissolute scions of inherited wealth and privilege who squander fortunes we can scarcely imagine. We bond in our opposition to them, in the violence of our hatred, our fear, our envy.

Nonetheless, as the image of those who indulge their appetites, these same young men are those we secretly long to be. The bonds of shared passion and hatred that unite us against them, that constitute us as the people, the *demos*—as those who breathe together, *e pluribus unum*—are smeared with fantasies of obscene enjoyment. We are invited to imagine their shining faces, their scent, the softness of their touch:

> What other man has ever presented such great temptations to young men as he? Some of them he had sex with in the most disgraceful way, while with others he scandalously submitted himself to their own sexual impulses. To some he promised whatever they hankered after, to others the death of their parents—and not merely by urging them on, but by giving active help. And how quickly he succeeded in assembling a vast crowd of the worst of society—and not only from the city, but from the countryside as well! Not only at Rome but even in the furthest corners of Italy, there was not a single debtor whom he failed to recruit to this extraordinary criminal alliance.
>
> *(2.8)*[31]

Catiline is a monster of enjoyment, and whether as Voltaire on his stage, Adams in his rooms, Galloway on the boat to England, or Hamilton penning jeremiads against the Whiskey rebellion, as readers we both assume the passion of Cicero and we picture what he asks us to imagine: a monstrous man surrounded by louche, well-oiled young men. Some of them he penetrates in ways that would be unacceptable for free young men in Rome, emasculating them, putting them in the position of a slave who serves others' pleasures with their bodies.[32] Others he allows to penetrate him, rendering him a bizarre sexual omnivore who was able to occupy all positions and yet somehow retain his power.[33] To some he promised to gratify their urges (*fructum libidinum*), to others the murder of their parents. Debtors, foreigners, those without a stake in the existing order of free, respectable men, men whose orifices are closed, men who only penetrate others in the approved manner, they are all breathing together. Can't you just imagine it? Can't you just picture it? We must stop it, lest we all start breathing faster, together (*con-spiratus*), lest all property and propriety be swept away into one single pulsing pit of passion, with no distinction between free and slave, actor and acted upon, viewer and viewed.

> So that you can appreciate the diversity of his interests and the full range of his activities, there is no gladiator in a training school who inclines ever so slightly to crime who does not also boast of his close relationship with Catiline—and on the other hand, there is no actor at all fickle and useless who does not also claim be just about his dearest friend.
>
> *(2.9)*[34]

Gladiators and actors in Rome were normally slaves or freedmen. In the Roman imagination, they were like unto prostitutes.[35] They were those who gave pleasure to others with their bodies. Their bodies were not their own but functioned as the objects of others. This was the problem with Catiline's behavior, or more precisely with what we are invited to imagine as Catiline's behavior, since Cicero offers not a scintilla of evidence that any of this is any truer than QAnon's most lurid PizzaGate Dreams.[36] The problem wasn't that he wanted to have sex with men. That would have been widely conceded as reasonable and normal. But he wanted to have sex with free-born aristocratic young men, men whose bodies are imagined to be impenetrable, men who if they are penetrated are rendered subjected to another's pleasure, and hence objects rather than subjects, women rather than men, slaves rather than free.[37] Catiline is himself both penetrated and penetrating, he is both a respectable aristocrat from an ancient patrician family, a Roman senator, and yet no different from a gladiator, an actor, or a prostitute. He is the monstrous other who inheres within the carefully cultivated distinctions on which the constitutional order rests, the fantasy of

its own conflagration against which we must erect an impenetrable shield. Nonetheless, from each of these encounters, from each of these trials by sexual, financial, and political fire, he emerges not weakened or emasculated, but heightened in his potency. "Catiline himself as a result of his repeated sexual misconduct and criminal activities, had acquired the ability to endure cold, hunger, thirst, and lack of sleep, and was therefore hailed as a hero to people of this sort" (2.9).[38]

Three

But who was this monster? What did he promise to those who followed him? We would do well to spend a few moments with the historian Sallust, whose telling of the conspiracy was equally well-known as Cicero's but who comes to his account some 20 years after the fact and as a former officer and official under Caesar. Like most ancient historians, Sallust's story is moralistic, and he frames his account of the Catilinarian conspiracy within a larger narrative of the corrosive force of the wealth and opportunities for corruption created by the growth of Roman power and the consequent stresses on the traditional structures of the Republic. Like Cicero, and QAnon, he links the increase in luxury with sexual perversity, spending, and debt. There is a vision here of the ideal republic as sexually and financially continent, but one that was haunted by the prospect that the prosperity, which all desire and is the mark of a successful polity, brings with it not only inequality and corruption, but also opportunities for and fantasies of enjoyment that were latent in the structures of republican power from its inception:

> Equally strong was their passion for fornication, guzzling, and other forms of sensuality. Men had themselves treated like women and women sold their chastity to every comer. To please their palates, they ransacked land and sea. They went to bed before they needed sleep, and instead of waiting until they felt hungry, thirsty, cold, or tired, they forestalled their bodies needs by self-indulgence. Such practices incited young men who had run through their property to have recourse to crime. Because their vicious natures found it hard to forego sensual pleasures, they resorted more and more to every means of getting and spending.
>
> *(BC 13)*[39]

This passage closes the opening of Sallust's account and leads directly into his recounting of the conspiracy, its discovery, and the consequences thereof.

Sallust, however, includes something Cicero does not: what purports to be a speech by Catiline to his followers in which he lays out the reasons for a revolution. This is the return of the repressed. After initial compliments to the courage and daring of his fellow conspirators, Catiline lays out his

case, and it is a compelling one. The Roman Republic has come under the control of a clique or oligarchy, who receives the tribute of foreign potentates as well as the tax revenues of every subjugated people. They use this power to oppress the rest of the Roman people, no matter their abilities, no matter their virtues. Their wealth is obscene: entire mountains leveled, mansions built into the sea, priceless works of art. Their greed knows no limits, while the rest of society wallows in poverty and destitution, lacking basic necessities. "We have nothing left, in fact, save the breath we draw in our wretchedness" (BC 20).[40]

> Awake, then! Here, here before your eyes is the liberty that you have yearned for, and withal affluence, honour, and glory, all of which fortune offers as the prizes of victory. Consider your situation and your opportunity, the peril and want that beset you, and the rich spoils that may be won in war: these plead more strongly than any words of mine … These are the objects I hope to help you achieve when I am your consul— unless indeed I deceive myself and you are content to be slaves instead of masters.
>
> *(BC 21)[41]*

These Catilinists "disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions." Romans, you "have nothing to lose but [your] chains."[42]

What did Catiline promise his followers? If Sallust is to be believed, and Cicero doesn't contradict him, "the cancellation of debts and proscription of the rich, magistracies and priesthoods, opportunities of plunder, and all the other things that war and the lust for conquest bring the victors" (BC 21).[43] And here we have the nub of the orgiastic nightmare of Cicero, Adams, and Voltaire: for the overturning of sexual boundaries in both Cicero and Sallust, and thus for all their later re-enactors, stands as synecdoche for the overturning of power relations generally and in particular those of property and finance. Nonetheless, this overturning simultaneously invests the possibility of revolution with an all but irresistible dream of obscene enjoyment, a celebration of the abject at once shattering and seductive, a celebration of what must be shed to establish the boundaries of republican law and the self-governing subject. The infinite attraction and terror of the death drive at once subtends and must be cast out of the liberal politico-economic order.[44]

Catiline represents the obscene obverse of the bourgeois revolution, everything it must repress to come into being. Where Catiline tells his men they must be either masters or slaves, Washington, when he hears that Lord Dunmore, the British Governor of Virginia, planned to offer freedom to

slaves who would join the British Army, exclaims "That Arch Traitor of the Rights of Humanity … should be instantly crushd" lest his army swell with black bodies.[45] Where Catiline promises the cancelation of debts and the expropriation of the rich, James Madison writes that Shay's rebellion, a revolt of discharged continental army soldiers mired in debt demanding back wages, was but a cover for a second revolution, one that would seek to expropriate wealthy planters.

> They profess to aim only at a reform of their Constitution and of certain abuses in the public administration, but an abolition of debts public and private, and a new division of property are strongly suspected to be in contemplation.[46]

Force would need to be applied.

From this perspective, then, we see that the wild fantasies of today, of QAnon theorists and others on the populist right and on the conspiratorial left, are already programmed into the rhetoric and ideology of the liberal state. Like Catiline, these conspiratorial groups occupy a bivalent position. They are both anti-elitist and fostered and funded by the scions of privilege (the Mercers, the Murdochs, the Kochs, etc.). These conspiratorial groups present themselves as the oppressed, the forgotten man, the silent majority, the victims of wokeness and political correctness run amok. They rehearse, celebrate, and engage in acts of racial violence, kidnapping of governmental officials, and insurrection. They see themselves as the defenders of traditional society and values against a perverse oligarchy, and they engage in elaborate fantasies of pedophilia, sexual assault, and ecstatic, ritualized violence, whether in the form of imagined satanic rituals or actual lynchings. They are the saviors of the republic and the ultimate figures of rebellion and transgression. They see themselves as Ciceros and as Catilines. Even if they do not know these figures' names, the ideological and rhetorical position for this identification already exists: the constellation of values and contradictions as well as their profound erotic cathexis are there just waiting to be filled with precise historical content. The conspiracy need only be revealed for all to assume their positions.

In many ways, Donald Trump is the perfect postmodern Catiline. He embodies all the contradictions. He is a fantasy figure of wealth and privilege—golden toilets, limousines, steak every night—but possessed of a vulgarity that is alien to the way traditional privilege understands itself, a coarseness that alienates Trump from *them* and makes him feel like one of *us*. At his rallies and in his speeches, he claims to represent traditional values, the ones that made America great: church, family, the military, the flag. But he is also a figure of transgression, a sexual predator, the man with the trophy wife, the man who has sex with porn stars, the draft dodger who

claimed venereal disease was his own personal Vietnam. He is the defender of the police, of law and order, and he incites his followers to acts of violence against the press, protesters, and ultimately the government itself. He is both the fomenter of conspiracy theories—birtherism, the deep state, the big lie—and an active conspirer with foreign interests and insurrectionists. He embodies both transgressive enjoyment and the revendication of the traditional privileges of people who perceive themselves as expropriated by an effeminate, oligarchic elite and the degenerate others they control. When one looks at the faces of the January 6th insurrectionists, at those who pack the Trump rallies, at Marjorie Taylor Greene and Matt Gaetz, one cannot avoid observing as Lacan did of Bernini's stature of Saint Teresa, "Enfin disons quand même le mot, et puis vous n'avez qu' à aller regarder dans une certaine église à Rome la statue du Bernin pour comprendre tout de suite, enfin quoi! qu'elle jouit" (*Encore* 16).[47]

In the founding of the United States and in the foundation of subsequent bourgeois republics, in the revolutions that laid the foundation for the liberal and neoliberal regimes which came in their wake, there was a certain slippage between the possibility of a form of embodiment centered on happiness and one centered on property. This slippage can be seen most dramatically in Jefferson's rewriting of the Lockean formula of "life, liberty, and estate" as "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." The first associates the possibility of life as a free person, as a master rather than a slave, with the ability to possess one's own property, the freedom to possess and make use of the wealth one has received. This is a notion of liberty predicated on possessive individualism. It imagines an autonomous ego that owns things and so become its own, comes into its own. With Jefferson's substitution of happiness for property, we move from a notion of freedom as self-ownership, with the consequent necessity of strict boundaries, to freedom as the possibility for affective investment and even enjoyment.[48] This is a much more radical and unstable notion, but it is also the moment of revolutionary possibility, the moment in which we ask ourselves are we happy, what do we desire, for what do we care, rather than what do we possess? And what we desire may not be simply what we have, but a world beyond that. It may not even be what others possess. This is the utopian moment of the revolution. Nonetheless, 11 years after the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution returns to the Lockean formula with "life, liberty, or property." This is the answer to Madison's fear of a revolutionary cancelation of debts and a redistribution of property, promises made by Sallust's Catiline. This was also the answer to Washington's fear that slaves would indeed become masters, that his property and his possessions would no longer be his to enjoy and might well seek to enjoy him.

The space of this slippage between these concepts of liberty is, I would contend, that marked by the Catilinarian conspiracy as it was not only

imagined but as it was literally embodied by writers, thinkers, artists, and revolutionaries from the beginning of the seventeenth until the middle of the twentieth century. As a paradigm of thought and nexus of imaginary identification, Catiline and his conspiracy function as the obscene obverse of a liberal democracy predicated on individualism and property. It imagines the violation of our bounded natures in an explosion of shattering enjoyment that threatens the integrity of the subject as a self-possessed and self-governing citizen, and thus the overturning of a government predicated on the preservation of subjects who are grounded neither in the divinely ordained kingdom of the sovereign's two bodies nor in a communism of the senses.[49] Catiline stands for both the overturning of the constitutional order and the terror of a longed-for enjoyment. He is an imaginary object that designates a space intrinsic to the liberal order long after his name has been forgotten. As the obverse of that order, the space of Catilinarian inscription remains largely invisible, revealing its full dimensionality only to the trained observer, inscribed on the side of life we dare not see. Such a space needs be conspiratorial, a breathing together in the dark, a dream of our coming together, *e pluirbus unum.*

You should do your own research. You should follow the clues. You should open your eyes.

Notes

1   *The Founders Online* lists no fewer than 100 instances of the terms Catiline, Catilina, Catilinarian, and Cataline.
2   Jason Frank, *The Democratic Sublime: On Aesthetics and Popular Assembly* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 64–65.
3   Wolf Blitzer, "Search for the 'Smoking Gun,'" *CNN.com/US*, January 10, 2003. www.cnn.com/2003/US/01/10/wbr.smoking.gun/
4   Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 4, 41–48; Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15 (2003): 11–40.
5   Michèle Lowrie, "Evidence and Narrative in Mérimée's 'Catilinarian Conspiracy,'" *New German Critique* 103 (2008): 19–25.
6   Fergus Millar, *The Crowd in Rome in the Late Republic* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 111.
7   Matthew Sharpe, "Cicero, Voltaire, and the *Philosophes* in the French Enlightenment," in *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Cicero*, ed. William H. F. Altman (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 336.
8   Victoria Emma Pagán, *Conspiracy Theory in Latin Literature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 4; citing Moscovici.
9   Sharpe, "Cicero, Voltaire, and the *Philosophes*," 349n97. See Agamben, *State of Exception*, "it is important to remember that the modern state of exception is a creation of the democratic-revolutionary tradition and not the absolutist one" (5) and the medieval exception represents an opening of the juridical system to an external fact, a sort of *fictio legis* by which, in this case, one acts as if the bishop had been legitimately elected. The modern state of exception is instead an attempt to include the exception itself within the juridical order by creating a zone of indistinction in which fact and law coincide. (26)

10 In Chapman's (1608) *The Conspiracy and Tragedy of Charles*, *the Duke of Byron* includes a carpet, which depicts the Catilinarian conspiracy, Pagán, *Conspiracy Theory in Latin Literature*, 16.

11 Mathilde Skoie in 2019 organized a panel on the reception of Catiline at the joint conference of the Fédération Internationale des Associations d'Études Classiques and the Classical Association of Britain (www.fiec2019.org/live19/wp-content/uploads/FIEC-Abstracts-2a.pdf). It included papers by Judith Kalb on "Catiline in Russia," Yannick Maes on Catiline in early modern political theory, "Caught between the devil and the deep blue sea: Catiline from Machiavelli to Milton," and Timm Reims on "Catiline in German Drama." See also her blog post on the reception of Catiline "The Reception of Catiline, The Classical Conspirator." Institute of Classical Studies. https://ics.blogs.sas.ac.uk/2018/06/22/the-reception-of-catiline-the-classical-conspirator/ (2018).

12 Thomas E. Ricks, *First Principles: What America's Founders Learned from the Greek and Romans and How That Shaped Our Country* (New York: Harper, 2020), 50; Carl J. Richard, "Cicero and the American Founders," in *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Cicero*, ed. William H. F. Altman (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 126, 130.

13 Pagán, *Conspiracy Theory in Latin Literature*, 52–53, observes that this is largely the way the conspiracy is portrayed in Juvenal 10.286–288, which was widely known in the eighteenth century and formed the basis for Samuel Johnson's "The Vanity of Human Wishes."

14 Voltaire, *Rome sauvée, ou Catilina, tragédie, représentée à Paris en févirer 1752* (Éd. 1753) (Paris: Hachette, 2018).

15 Sharpe, "Cicero, Voltaire, and the *Philosophes*," 329–331, 334–335, 337.

16 Lowrie, "Evidence and Narrative."

17 Ricks, *First Principles*, 165.

18 Ricks, *First Principles*, 222–237, 249–263; Richard, "Cicero and the American Founders," 129; Richard, *The Founders and the Classics: Greece, Rome, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 90–91, 119–120.

19 William H. F. Altman, "Cicero and the Fourth Triumvirate," in *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Cicero*, ed. William H. F. Altman (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 215–246.

20 Ricks, *First Principles*, 220; Edward Wortley Montagu, *Reflections on the Rise and Fall of the Antient Republicks: Adapted to the Present State of Great Britain* (London: A Millar, 1759), 280.

21 D. H. Berry, trans., *Cicero: Political Speeches* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 57.

22 Brooks Otis, *Virgil: A Study in Civilized Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 69–76, 219–230; Paul Allen Miller, "Sive Deae seu sint dirae obscenaeque volucres," *Arethusa* 22 (1989): 47–79; Miller "The Minotaur Within: Fire, the Labyrinth, and Strategies of Containment in *Aeneid* 5 and 6," *Classical Philology* 90 (1995): 225–240.

23 Berry, *Cicero*, 157.

24 Pagán, *Conspiracy Theory in Latin Literature*, 3.

25 Pagán, *Conspiracy Theory in Latin Literature*, 161.

26 Pagán, *Conspiracy Theory in Latin Literature*, 304–05n14; Susan Shapiro, *O Tempora! O Mores! Cicero's Catilinarian Orations* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005), 160.

27 Catharine Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 188–195; Anthony Corbeill, *Controlling Laughter: Political Humor in the Late Roman Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 131, 142.

28 Berry, *Cicero*, 171.

29 Berry, *Cicero*, 171.

30 Berry, *Cicero*, 171.

31 Berry, *Cicero*, 172.

32 Michel Foucault, *L'Usage de plaisirs. L'Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 2 (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), 56, 82–98, 232–237; Michel Foucault, *Le Souci de soi. L'Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 3 (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), 15–50; Foucault, *Subjectivité et vérité. Cours au Collège de France, 1984*, ed. Frédéric Gros (Paris: Hautes Études/Gallimard/Seuil, 2014), 90–94; Paul Veyne *La société romaine* (Paris: Seuil 2001), 112–113.

33 Holt N. Parker, "The Teratogenic Grid," in *Roman Sexualities*, eds. Judith P. Hallett and Marilyn B. Skinner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 49–65.

34 Berry, *Cicero*, 172.

35 Edwards, *Politics of Immorality*, 118; Catharine Edwards, "Unspeakable Professions: Public Performance and Prostitution in Ancient Rome," in *Roman Sexualities*, eds. Judith P. Hallett and Marilyn B. Skinner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 66–95.

36 Sallust, while generally accepting the ideological constellation of sexual and financial dissipation that led to the decline of the republic and rise of figures like Catiline, specifically acknowledges that there is no actual evidence that "Catiline's house practiced unnatural lewdness" (BC 14). It is rather, he claims, simply a natural assumption. S. A. Handford, trans., *Sallust: Jugurthine War, Conspiracy of Catiline* (London: Penguin, 1963), 184.

37 See Sandra Joshel, *Work, Identity, and Legal Status at Rome: A Study of Occupational Inscriptions* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 67, 152–153; Edwards, *Politics of Immorality*, 75; David Konstan, *Sexual Symmetry: Love in the Ancient Novel and Related Genres* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 116–121; Amy Richlin, "Making Up a Woman: The Face of Roman Gender," in *Off with Her Head: The Denial of Women's Identity in Myth, Religion and Culture*, eds. Howard Elberg-Schwartz and Windy Doniger (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 119; Jonathan Walters, "Invading the Roman Body: Manliness and Impenetrability in Roman Thought," in *Roman Sexualities*, eds. Judith P. Hallett and Marilyn B. Skinner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 30, 39–40; Veyne, 92–93.

38 Berry, *Cicero*, 172.

39 Handford, *Sallust*, 183, translation altered.

40 Handford, *Sallust*, 190.

41 Handford, *Sallust*.

42 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. Samuel Moore (London: Penguin, 1967), 120–121.

43 Handford, *Sallust*, 190.

44 Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur: Essais sur l'abjection* (Paris: Seuil, 1980), 9–10, 17–22, 65–66, 79–80.

45 *Founders Online*, letter to Lt. Colonel Reed, December 1775.

46 *Founders Online*, Letter to James Madison Sr., November 1786.

47 "In the end, we should just say the word, and then you need only go to a certain church in Rome and have look at Bernini's statue to understand immediately, what then! that she is coming." Jacques Lacan, *Encore, Le Séminaire, Livre XX*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1975), 97.

48 Ricks, *First Principles*, 126–128; but see Jeffrey Di Leo, *Happiness* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 44–47.

49 Frank, *The Democratic Sublime*, 8.

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2

UNSETTLING HISTORY

How an Egyptian Conspiracy Theory Turns Time into Place

Elena Chiti

The last two decades have witnessed growing interest in conspiracy theories as a research object in itself, worth to be investigated for the sake of knowledge and not merely as a first step to contrasting social dangers. At the origins of the field in the 1930s, and well until the 1950s, the interest in conspiracy theories was marked instead by an association between conspiracism and totalitarianism.[1] In the following decades, scholars have gradually challenged this assumption, acknowledging the circulation of conspiracy theories in non-totalitarian and non-authoritarian settings, while nuancing the view of conspiracism under authoritarian regimes.

Despite a general acknowledgment of complexity, however, the tendency to apprehend conspiracy theories as pathological disfunctions of mass society still appears in some approaches. As late as 2010, Matthew Gray criticized the recurrent usage of this lens with regard to the Middle East, seen as a region where some supposed cultural traits would lead to conspiracism. Going beyond exceptionalism, Gray placed the Middle East on the global map of conspiracy theories. Far from pathological, Middle Eastern conspiracism finds in colonial history paradigms of injustices, including actual conspiracies, which corroborate the belief in conspiracy theories. Besides, since the 1980s, the gap between state and society has widened. The failure of post-colonial states at providing basic goods and services has accompanied a brutal neoliberal turn in the economy and increased authoritarianism in the political field. This changing socio-political context, and not some essentialized traits, has proven to be conducive to conspiracism.[2]

Focusing as I do on a Middle Eastern context, I will also start by reasserting that, while having its specificities, the Middle East does not

structurally diverge from any global norms. Research on Middle Eastern conspiracy theories can both benefit from and contribute to global research on the topic. In addition, while Middle Eastern authoritarian regimes do spread conspiracy theories, this form of conspiracism from above, due to the state and its representatives, is not the only one in the region. As in the rest of the world, there are conspiracy theories ascribable to citizens who do not hold political offices. In authoritarian states that limit political expression, the conspiracy theories of depoliticized citizens often materialize in arts and culture, as Benjamin Koerber shows analyzing the conspiracy frame in contemporary Egyptian literature.[3]

Also centered on Egypt, this paper studies one of such conspiracy theories that emerged, from below, in popular culture. It builds on the increasing attention that, since the 1990s, researchers have drawn to conspiracism from below as an indicator of shared concerns within a society.[4] Timothy Melley designates, as a common ground for such concerns, a feeling "of diminished agency" linked to both the bureaucratization of the state, from a domestic perspective, and its reduced autonomy on an international scale.[5] This conclusion holds true beyond the American context where it was developed and is even truer today, with the expansion of neo-liberalization and surveillance bureaucracy across the world. In the Middle East as well, before a state perceived as all-controlling and yet incapable of defending national interests, citizens might develop a sense of powerlessness. They might thus turn to conspiracy theories as a means to regain agency, retaining the power to interpret crucial events in contrast with official accounts.

The tension between official accounts and conspiracy theories is at the core of this paper, which relies on the insights that cultural studies and social sciences have brought to this line of discussion. In her work on conspiracy theories and gossip, Clare Birchall highlights the power relations at stake in the distinction between what falls under the definition of legitimate knowledge and what, in a specific context, does not.[6] In parallel, social scientists have recognized that, while fact-checking can expose conspiracy theories, the arguments on which they are built are not, from a discursive perspective, inherently flawed. On the contrary, as Luc Boltanski points out, social sciences and conspiracy theories share the tendency to exert constant doubt before surface explanations, aiming to uncover root causes, in line with the "hermeneutics of suspicion" identified by Paul Ricœur.[7]

Michael Butter and Peter Knight have placed this debate in a multidisciplinary perspective, refining the tools to systematically analyze the clash/encounter between conspiracist and academic hermeneutics. The *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, which they directed, devotes considerable space to the methodologies of both conspiracism and the disciplines that examine it. Researchers show not only how semiotics, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, psychology, political sciences deal

with conspiracist reasoning, but also how such reasoning might test, epistemologically, the very limits of their disciplines.[8] In a similar way, Frida Beckman explores literature as both a body of works and a theoretical framework from which to tackle the fracture between reality and the self at work in generalized suspicion toward truth and power.[9]

History is also discussed. Andrew McKenzie-McHarg engages with the problem of historical evidence, studying how conspiracist reasoning handles it. He illustrates, over the last decades, a shift from non-visual to visual sources in conspiracist approaches.[10] Ute Caumanns and Andreas Önnerfors highlight the role of visual tropes, over the course of centuries, in the dissemination of conspiracy theories.[11] Although not focusing on conspiracism, Peter Burke set the ground for analyzing the usage of images as historical evidence.[12] Raising awareness on issues of purpose, frame, time lapse, mediations, he problematized the alleged raw character of photographic and filmic material.[13] From these reflections on evidence, immediacy, and mediateness, historians can contribute further insights into the epistemological competition between conspiracy theories and history. In a short piece of 2003, Floyd Rudmin drafted the concept of "naïve deconstructive history," arguing that conspiracy theories from below are attempts to rewrite history outside of academia, whenever official historical narratives are deemed unreliable.[14] Yet he did not expand on what these attempted rewritings *do* to history as a discipline and how academic history deals with them.

My research object is one such rewriting: a conspiracy theory that has recently sparked a debate in Egypt around a criminal case of 1920. I will look at how the conspiracist reappraisal turned the case into a polarizing affair, before exploring the questions it raised about the method, pace, and possibility of historical knowledge. The aim is to investigate, from a micro perspective and through Arabic sources, the tension between history and conspiracy theories in their scopes, ethical frameworks, and pretentions to truth.

Unsettling a Scandal: Dinshaway as a Metonym

In November 1920, the Alexandrian police dismantled a gang deemed responsible for the murders of 17 women. In May 1921, a trial led to the death sentence for six of the gang members, among whom, for the first time in the Egyptian secular justice system, two women. The sisters Rayyā and Sakīna 'Alī Hammām, involved in clandestine prostitution, had monopolized attention in the press, becoming the symbols of the alleged moral decay of Egypt under British occupation.[15] Since then, the sisters have been present in both institutional heritage and popular culture. Yet, until recently, their guilt was not a matter of dispute. Even the cultural productions that did not

portray them as natural-born killers, pointing to poverty as a criminogenic factor, did not deny their involvement in the murders.

This shifted in 2015, when Egyptian scriptwriter Aḥmad ʿAshūr announced his commitment to restoring the sisters' reputation through his movie *Barāʾat Rayyā wa-Sakīna*: "The innocence of Rayyā and Sakīna." Although the movie has not been released, the wide coverage it received, being at the core of censorship and copyright issues, made the project famous. Moreover, as Peter Burke points out, a movie title is already a powerful "iconotext": a written message of visual impact, "which influences the expectations of viewers before they see a single image."[16] Here, the innocence claim of the title was reinforced by a truth claim. ʿAshūr declared that his script was the outcome of ten years of research, based on both the court file and interviews with the descendants of some defendants in Alexandria.[17] He firmly distinguished between the movie backdrop, meant to fictionalize his own research, and the main content, which would provide historical truth on Rayyā and Sakīna.[18]

"The truth is," he announced on TV, "Rayyā and Sakīna didn't kill anyone."[19] When asked about the female corpses buried under the houses where the sisters had lived, ʿAshūr replied that his movie would clear up who killed those women and why.[20] He argued that robbery cannot be the motive since Rayyā and Sakīna worked in legal and not clandestine prostitution, which had enriched them.[21] He claimed both that the sisters led anti-British demonstrations during the revolution of 1919 and worked undercover to gather information on the British,[22] adding that Sakīna had joined a secret cell that also bore weapons.[23] He presented the murder charge against them as a plot, which the British orchestrated in collusion with the Egyptian authorities, to get rid of two dangerous anti-colonial fighters such as Rayyā and Sakīna.[24]

When asked to prove his claim, ʿAshūr switched instead to a famous colonial injustice: "We cannot talk about impartiality of the judiciary at the time, because we were under the British occupation, which had sentenced Egyptians to death eight (*sic*) years earlier, in the Dinshaway incident."[25] The so-called Dinshaway incident occurred in fact in 1906, under British consul-general Lord Cromer, the *de facto* ruler of Egypt from 1883 to 1907. Egyptian civilians from the village of Dinshaway were sentenced to flogging, imprisonment, and even to death in a summary trial opposing them to British soldiers. The trial was held before a special court that could administer discretionary punishment without appeal and execute the sentences right away. This procedure was made possible by a khedivial decree issued in 1895, under the pressure of Lord Cromer himself. In other words, British colonial authorities had given themselves the prerogative to subject civilians to martial law.[26]

When corrected about the date, ʿAshūr claimed that the execution took place two years later, not right away in 1906,[27] thus disregarding one of

the aspects that made the trial unfair. Yet the parallel with Dinshaway is probably the most powerful element in his narrative. Such a military trial of civilians, immediately followed by a brutal public execution, discredited the alleged civilizing mission of colonial occupation, bringing to light "the belief in the racial superiority of whites, the monopolization of power by the strong, and the willingness to subordinate justice in order to retain power."[28] Dinshaway holds, until today, a symbolic value. Functioning as a metonym, it has become evidence in itself of an idealized Egyptian patriotism and, on the other side, of the barbarity of British colonialism.[29] Moreover, the Emergency Law in force in Egypt for decades – including in 2015, along with similarly repressive laws still in effect today – can be seen as "a linear descendant of the martial law instituted under the British."[30]

By drawing an analogy with Dinshaway, 'Ashūr asserted that no court could ever be fair under colonial occupation, thus avoiding the burden of proof on the specific unfairness of Rayyā and Sakīna's trial. Such a twist is frequent in conspiracist rhetoric, which may refer to a past conspiracy or structural injustice as sufficient evidence to expose another presumed conspiracy, although not directly related.[31] Along with the aura of factual reliability, analogies with iconic events provide ground for a chain of associations that elicits emotional reactions.[32] Here, the indignation aroused by Dinshaway – as a metonym for colonialism, if not for military trials of civilians – is associated with the trial of Rayyā and Sakīna, although the latter was not held under martial law.

Despite the flaws, 'Ashūr's discursive strategy was successful. Although the innocence of Rayyā and Sakīna does not make unanimity in Egypt, it did undermine unanimity around their guilt. In 2016, in down-town Alexandria, I was confronted by people who said that calling the sisters "criminals" was offensive since they were actually anti-colonial fighters.[33] Today, this narrative is widespread online and offline and many ignore that it was circulated by 'Ashūr, linking it instead to some collective reassessment. The conspiracy theory produced a shift in the status of the case, from a "scandal" to an "affair." The nuance is relevant: both imply the public exposure of a wrongdoing, with the accusers taking public opinion as a witness, yet the reactions differ. In a scandal, social disapproval of the accused is unanimous. In an affair, some turn the accused into a victim of injustice and public opinion is divided.[34] After one century of unchallenged status as a scandal, Rayyā and Sakīna has become a disputed affair over which Egyptians divide.

Unsettling Documentation: The Spectacle of Sources

Floyd Rudmin warns that "if historians and journalists want to understand why they are being displaced by conspiracy theory, it would be most

reasonable to examine their own failing first."[35] Indeed, conspiracist narratives flourish when official explanations seem biased, flawed, or unsatisfactory. According to Jan-Willem van Prooijen, conspiracy theories "necessarily contain justice judgments," involving the reappraisal of a question in moral terms.[36]

To be sure, some flaws did emerge, which point to a bias against Rayyā and Sakīna. For months before the trial, the press sensationalized them as female criminals, despite the arrest of both men and women.[37] In the court file, on the contrary, Rayyā and Sakīna are not seen as the main perpetrators, but rather as accomplices of the men.[38] The death sentence against them appears then particularly strict, especially in view of a concomitant trial, also held in the Egyptian Delta, where female accomplices in a series of murders were acquitted. Historian Nefertiti Takla and journalist Ṣalāḥ 'Īsā have highlighted the discrepancy, the latter going so far as to title his book *Rijāl Rayyā wa-Sakīna* ("Rayyā and Sakīna's men").

If Takla's work in English was not available in 2015, 'Īsā's book in Arabic, published a decade earlier, was still a best seller in Egypt. 'Ashūr mentioned it several times, yet he put it in the same category as "artistic sources" (*maṣādir fanniyya*). On the other hand, he called his own approach "research" (*baḥth*), claiming he had documents proving his assertions but could not show them in order not to spoil the movie. While some journalists kept asking for documents, some Egyptian and Arab media outlets seemed to be content with the allusion to them. Their titles read: "With documents… 'Ashūr proves that Rayyā and Sakīna owned a licensed brothel,"[39] "The cinematic demonstration of Rayyā and Sakīna's innocence with documents,"[40] "Based on sources… Rayyā and Sakīna's innocence after almost 100 years."[41] The first outlet published, below the title, a picture of 'Ashūr showing – as if it were a document – the printed copy of his own movie script.

In the same period, journalist Ṣalāḥ 'Īsā[42] himself and historian Muḥammad 'Abd al-Wahhāb[43] spoke up against 'Ashūr's narrative pointing out that it disregards historical evidence. Both joined TV shows to confront him, 'Īsā over the phone and 'Abd al-Wahhāb in person. The debate between 'Abd al-Wahhāb and 'Ashūr, in particular, turned to a clash over the sources, as the academically trained historian addressed the scriptwriter:

> - *You say that your main source was the court file. How many pages does it count?*
> - Have you looked at it?
> - *No, it's you…*
> - I learn from you, you're a big expert!

Faced with 'Abd al-Wahhāb's insistence on this point, 'Āshūr ended up responding:

> - I didn't focus on the number of pages. But I can tell you, it's around 5.000 pages. But I didn't focus on counting page by page, I focused on studying the matter. Then, if you talk about the number of pages, let me ask you: who did condemn Rayyā and Sakīna? What's the name of the public prosecutor of Alexandria?

After a round of interruptions, 'Abd al-Wahhāb managed to show the cover of the court file, kept at the National Centre of Judiciary Studies, which mentions its length: 2,200 pages. Whenever he contested 'Āshūr, 'Abd al-Wahhāb showed his sources: all written documents, mainly from the court file. The camera framed them closely, while the show host read them aloud to testify, once more, the accordance between their content and 'Abd al-Wahhāb's claims. On the other side, 'Āshūr commented upon a single picture, namely the Photoshopped version, widespread online, of Rayyā and Sakīna's mugshots. Claiming that the sisters looked ugly in them, while they must have been beautiful since they worked as prostitutes, he turned the mugshots into evidence of torture, which in turn became evidence of their being anti-colonial fighters.[44]

This is a case in point in the tension between "documentation" and "narration" widely explored by Carlo Ginzburg. Documentation is a reconstruction of the past based on verifiable sources, enunciated through quotes. Narration, instead, makes the past visible through vivid, though unverifiable, representations. While quotes underline that we can only access the past in a mediated way, acknowledging its absence, vividness creates the illusion that the past is present.[45] Before a methodological shift toward the end of the eighteenth century, history was the narration of notable facts, supposedly due to a handful of prominent individuals. In this tradition, the historian had to convince the audience through skillful argumentation, conveying the illusion of reality.[46] Providing and evaluating evidence were the tasks of antiquarians, engaged in systematic collections of documents, no matter whether they could help elucidate specific questions.[47] When skeptical voices were raised about history as a discipline relying upon traditions of written texts, expressly conceived as testimonies for posterity, historians gradually adopted the antiquarian method. They started comparing written and non-written sources, interrogating as testimonies pieces that were not fashioned as such: what Marc Bloch calls "the witnesses against their will" (*les témoins malgré eux*).[48] Such focus on collecting, classifying, and evaluating documents, put to the service of elucidating a problem, is "the antiquary's contribution to the ethics of the historian."[49]

'Ashūr's handling of history clearly lies outside the ethics of documentation, today at the core of historical research. However, instead of assuming that it is deprived of any ethics, I will try to reconstruct the ethical framework that emerges from his approach. When challenged by journalists, 'Ashūr emphasized his impartiality:

> -*With whom did you sympathize more, Rayyā or Sakīna?*
> -Neither Rayyā nor Sakīna. I didn't sympathize with anyone. I sympathized
>   with history that was recounted wrongly. And that I recount rightly.[50]

Despite the reference to history, his claim of impartiality is not linked to the profession of historian. Along with cinema studies, 'Ashūr pointed to his background as a law student:

> I studied the court records as someone who has studied law and focuses
> on the motives. Like a judge (*qāḍi*), an arbitrator (*ḥākim*) who says I don't
> like this sentence and asks for proofs.[51]

Historians have reflected upon the parallel between historian and judge. Both work within the "evidential paradigm": they analyze elements, seen as clues, within a context, linking them in a thread that they follow up to a conclusion.[52] The difference comes with pace and scope. While the judge has to release a verdict by a specific date, the historian works, in principle, without time pressure.[53] This different temporality also affects the work outcomes. The verdict of the judge can be invalidated by further legal determinations only up to a judiciary truth that is established once and for all. Historical truth, on the contrary, is open-ended: "present-day historians know, as did their predecessors, that their research results will be challenged by future historians."[54] For this reason, they can more easily acknowledge their limits. As Natalie Zemon-Davis points out, historians do not have to stick to *one* plot. They can present different plots as equally convincing in view of the available evidence, without leaving aside "the uncertainties, the 'perhaps,' the 'may-have-beens.' "[55]

When reopening the case of Rayyā and Sakīna, 'Ashūr aimed, instead, to issue a new verdict. He was not content with pointing to the loopholes in the eventuality of leaving uncertainties unresolved. Moreover, despite his analogy with the judge, he seemed to undertake the role of a defense lawyer, concerned with asserting, rather than evaluating, the truthfulness of a specific version. He talked about righting a miscarriage of justice, restoring the sisters' reputation. Presenting his movie as a mission for the sake of justice,[56] he envisaged to replay the past and show it to the audience: the court of public opinion. On the one hand, any trial can be seen as a "historiographic experiment," in which the parties attempt to replay the past in order to

test the plausibility of different reconstructions.[57] On the other, 'Ashūr aimed to replay a single reconstruction, shifting the focus again from testing to championing, by vividly showing, his own version. In Caumanns and Önnefors's terms, the performance results in performativity, since it is meant to rhetorically establish an account by visualizing the unseen.[58] Moreover, 'Ashūr intended to visualize not only historical events that are out of reach due to the passage of time but also acts that only the perpetrators could have seen. As Michael Butter puts it, fictional conspiracies "can be real beyond any doubt, as readers and audiences witness the evildoings of the conspirators directly."[59]

When a journalist argued that this kind of reconstruction, lacking ground, is just an opinion, 'Ashūr and his film editor, 'Abdallah Manṣūr, retorted: "But what is history, if not the expression of opinions of those who wrote it?"[60] Leaving documentation aside, and thus external verification, history becomes a collection of opinions that nothing sets apart from fiction. 'Ashūr denies to history any pretention to truth, insisting instead on a moral dimension:

> History is the experience of human life. Why do we recount or write history? In order to learn from events that might repeat themselves for us, to learn from our mistakes and from the success of others and succeed like them.[61]

This paradigm of *historia magistra vitae* unsettles documentation, whose goal is elucidating a historical question for the sake of knowledge, beyond educational concerns. It does fit, however, with narration. Indeed, regarding history as the experience of human life means enlightening the present through the past by means of exemplarity.[62] Associating as he does justice and cinema, 'Ashūr makes spectacle a moral tool for educating the viewers.

While 'Ashūr fully embraces the ethics of narration, it would be misleading to assume that 'Abd al-Wahhāb does the same with documentation. Documentation and narration have different paces and the former, loaded with quotes to be verified and therefore slower, is not suited to make an impact on TV. In the attempt to make it at all costs, 'Abd al-Wahhāb focused on documents, rather than documentation. He never mentioned the difficulties to read, evaluate, and piece documents together, nor the open-ended, proportional character of historical truth. He never pointed to the flaws in the trial of Rayyā and Sakīna, but only to the factual errors in 'Ashūr's narrative. By showing scattered documents as containers of historical truth, accessible without interpretive work, he did extract documents from the documentation process, ultimately contributing to unsettling documentation ethics.

Unsettling the Pace: Swift Post-Revolutionary History

What stands out in the success of 'Ashūr's conspiracy theory, as in the renewed debate around the sisters, is the hunger for history outside of academia, if not for non-academic history, freed from the constraints of documentation that slow down its pace. On the one side, this is today a global trend, resulting in the commodification of the past at stake in some cultural productions, such as neo-historical fiction or drama.[63] On the other, this phenomenon has been observed in particular in the Arab cultural landscape after the wave of revolutions of 2010–2011. Revolutions open up new horizons of expectation, with potentially conflicting scenarios that may all seem equally plausible. In such times of societal crisis, history is called into question to give sense to both a tense present and a scaringly inscrutable future.[64] This "need for history" manifests in a profusion of rewritings of the past, which can substantiate different and sometimes incompatible claims.[65]

Egypt is no exception to this trend. The revolution of 2011 has unleashed a real fascination for history, going beyond the appeal of old-looking pictures or the nostalgia for an idealized past.[66] Facebook pages, fiction, and drama revisiting the past seem to respond to the need of a generation, whose encounter with history was mediated by dominant narratives through school or propaganda accounts. Dina Heshmat observes that "the porosity between past and present is nowhere as striking as in the connection between 1919 and 2011," the two revolutions showing similarities not only in the joy but also the disillusion they brought about.[67] I will add that the hunger for a reappraisal of the revolution of 1919 – Rayyā and Sakīna's epoch – comes not only in a technological but also in a cultural environment that favors rewritings of history from below.

Scholars have long emphasized how Internet plays a role in spreading conspiracism, by facilitating the connection among individuals who share the same distrust toward official accounts.[68] Furthermore, the Internet boom has contributed to propelling conspiracy theories from the fringes to the mainstream, paving the way for commodified conspiracies that can be consumed as cultural products, "without belief or commitment."[69] And there is another aspect to be considered. Along with the circulation of ideas, Internet facilitates the circulation of historical documents, generating an "abundance of raw material, easily assembled into a professional-looking form."[70]

In the last two decades, archives and libraries around the world have engaged in the digitization of historical documents, aiming to improve both their availability and, in principle, their preservation. While the process does make documents more accessible, it can complicate their preservation *as* documents. Egyptian institutions themselves do not always provide, for the digitized files, the context that surrounds a document making it readable for

historians: description, date, provenance. In some cases, even the collocation within the archive is missing.[71]

Bibliotheca Alexandrina is one of the main institutional actors that has contributed to such decontextualization. Among its numerous digitization projects, it launched the webpage *Dhākirat Miṣr al-Muʿāṣira* ("Memory of Modern Egypt"),[72] presented as a "digital repository documenting the last 200 years of Egypt's modern history." While a simple click suffices to view the documents, their documentary value is far from obvious. "Memory of Modern Egypt" presents what it calls "The Rayyā and Sakīna court file" (*malaff qaḍiyya t Rayyā wa-Sakīna*), a collection of 83 pages, among written documents and pictures, taken from the court file.[73] Yet there is no mention that the original file counts, as ʿAbd al-Wahhāb recalled, 2,200 pages and the selection criteria are not enounced. The documents might have been selected for the sake of visual impact, rather than informative potential. Pages with stamps, lists, and signatures seem to have been privileged, even when the poor quality of the reproduction makes them hardly readable. Out of 83 pages, 13 are images: not only pictures of the crime scenes, but also portraits of Rayyā and Sakīna with their husbands and the now-famous portrait of Rayyā with her daughter Badīʿa. The 13 pictures do not bear headings explaining who the subjects are, nor where the images come from. The excessive brightness and low contrast make their subjects hardly recognizable and the few handwritten captions difficult to decipher.

As a result, both written and visual documents end up documenting themselves, instead of an external reality. Their value is not in the possibility of being read within a context in order to elucidate specific questions. They seem to be valued, instead, as indexes of the case of Rayyā and Sakīna, as if there were no need to read them within a whole. In this way, they function as metonyms: each of them gives a taste of Rayyā and Sakīna, as a postcard of the Pyramids would give a taste of Egypt. While hindering documentation, and thus historical research, this metonymic usage offers fruitful ground for narration. Once decontextualized, these scattered parts can be easily placed in new contexts and vividly stand for different wholes.

If this different approach to documents distinguishes documentation and narration, it would be misleading to ascribe the former practice to institutional actors, while confining the latter to Internet users. It might be worth emphasizing that Bibliotheca Alexandrina is a library launched by the Egyptian government in cooperation with several international bodies. In addition, Internet users also find decontextualized pictures of the sisters in the book *Rijāl Rayyā wa-Sakīna* by journalist Ṣalāḥ ʿĪsā, which, too, is available online. While based on both the court file and press sources, the book does not distinguish between the two, nor clearly references the sources corroborating each claim. The pictures it shows bear captions disclosing the identity of the actors ("Rayyā and her daughter Badīʿa") or their role within

the case ("the public prosecutor," "a victim"), not the provenance or archival collocation. In short, the tendency to favor narration over documentation is not limited to online venues or popular knowledge. Although the Internet facilitates it, its users might piece together decontextualized documents while replicating – and not necessarily opposing – practices of legitimate and even official producers of knowledge. As Clare Birchall shows, issues around legitimacy are ever-shifting, pointing to "the alterity that resides 'within' knowledge" and the tensions around its definition.[74] The straightforward classification of conspiracy theories as counter-narratives is, once more, highly problematic: not only due to state conspiracism, but also, I will argue, because conspiracy theories might arise from attempts to re-assemble scattered documents in a legitimate-looking form.

Unsettling Time: Eyewitnessing a Century-Old Case

The need for history unleashed by the revolution does not dismiss documents as such. Yet its rapid pace, in line with Internet communication and post-revolutionary anxiety, does impede the documentation process. The need for swift history is a need for vivid history, whose truthfulness would be accessible to anyone at first glance, without long explanations or specific training. Moving away from documentation, rewritings of history privilege visual over written sources, as if the former could show reality in an objective, unmediated manner. Many YouTube videos circulate that claim to disclose the "real" pictures of Rayyā and Sakīna's houses, despite the fact that none of the houses where the sisters rented rooms has been preserved as they were. Some videos talk about *a* single house, showing a building where the sisters never lived but which was their house in the famous movie *Rayyā wa-Sakīna* of 1953, by director Ṣalāḥ Abū Sayf. Once more, these kinds of short-cuts are not limited to YouTubers. Pan-Arab channel *AlArabiya* presented the movie house as "the house of Rayyā and Sakīna's crimes,"[75] while newspaper *Youm7* published a picture with the following heading: "Rayyā and Sakīna's house after its demolition and reconstruction."[76]

The preference for visual sources, along with the skepticism about written documents, can be explained within the post-revolutionary conception of history for the people, open to the interpretive work of everyone, after decades of history in the service of official agendas or oppositional yet elitist goals. Even the distrust toward professional historians in favor of eyewitnesses can betray, as McKenzie-McHarg argues, a "democratic suspicion toward expertise."[77] Indeed, a populist approach to history seems to be at the core of the popular fascination around Rayyā and Sakīna. But this post-2011 populism, born in opposition to post-colonial populist regimes, stresses a different aspect of "the people." While post-colonial regimes emphasized the alleged unity among "the people," eliding the differences under the

category of the "nation," post-2011 populism has re-evaluated bottom-up manifestations of the popular, from dialects and localness to rap and self-published poetry.

The renewed interest in the ordinary and the local has drawn attention to Labban, the Alexandrian district where Rayyā and Sakīna lived in 1920. In order to establish whether the sisters were criminals or anti-colonial fighters, YouTubers and journalists did not turn to archives or historians. Instead, they bypassed time through place: unable to go back to 1920, they went to Labban. One century after the execution of the sisters, they searched – literally – for eyewitnesses. A reportage by DotMsr broadcasting company presents "Al-Maʿbadī: the last 'eyewitness' (*shāhid ʿayān*) on Rayyā and Sakīna."[78] Al-Maʿbadī, a man in his 70s or 80s, is asked to testify about the century-old case, as if he had been alive in 1920 and able to remember. Playing the game, the man does provide answers about the location of *the* house and the unfolding of the crimes: the house was near the church; the sisters went to the textile market to locate wealthy-looking women, then invited them home with a pretext, while the gang played loud music in front of the police station to cover the screams. These elements are groundless: not only talking about a single house is misleading, but also the inquiry showed that the gang hit women from Labban, engaged in clandestine prostitution as Rayyā and Sakīna; the victims were drugged and loud music was not involved. What al-Maʿbadī actually gives are elements from the movie *Rayyā wa-Sakīna* of 1953, which became a cult in Egypt and seems to have marked the older generation in Labban.

Two other 70-year-old "eyewitnesses" provide more grounded information: the sisters were not anti-colonial fighters; the gang only killed women from Labban. Yet they mix them up with filmic elements, such as the drum-beating to cover the screams.[79] When asked about the houses, they admit that none has been preserved and point, as an alternative, to "the movie house." Despite being pressured, neither of the two acts as an actual eyewitness. When a YouTuber portrays one of them as "the oldest in Labban," the man clarifies that he did not witness Rayyā and Sakīna's case but "heard it from the elderly."[80] The other recalls his childhood experience as an eyewitness of the movie-making in the 1950s: star actor "Anwar Wagdī was coming down from that street and I would accompany him."[81]

In the last few years, the two men have appeared in an increasing number of videos and articles and their role seems to have been institutionalized. After being placed "among the residents of Labban,"[82] they are usually greeted by respect formulas such as *sayyid* or *ʿamm*. The mention of their role sounds like a professional title: *ḥakāwī al-buyūt*, "the house-teller," or *usṭà al-buyūt*, "the expert of the houses."[83] This transition from old resident to eyewitness to tourist guide is normalized by official media. *AlArabiya* explains that a house-teller, "who has been patronizing the place for more

than 60 years, undertakes to give visitors the details about the place and the crimes that occurred around 100 years ago."[84]

The standardization of the house-teller figure highlights a relationship with historical knowledge based on two forms of cultural capital: old age and local roots. In a video of 2019, a young YouTuber visiting Labban stages himself in the company of a house-teller, without even interviewing him: the snapshot with the old man is a sufficient proof of credibility.[85] Yet this transfer of credibility cannot live up to localness. When the same YouTuber amends wrong information about the houses, a follower comments back: "we come from the area" and "maybe tomorrow I'll take my grandfather in my car and go to the house, he is 95 years old and I am 46, and he's the one who told us."[86]

Still, it would be misleading to overemphasize age and localness while forgetting class and power dynamics. Journalists, YouTubers, and visitors are outsiders, mainly from Cairo. Even when coming from other Alexandrian districts, they have not experienced the stigmatization that hit Labban, for decades, in connection with Rayyā and Sakīna. Discussing neo-historical fiction, Elodie Rousselot shows how the commodification of the past, its representation for consumption in the present, can lead to exoticism: the construction of the past as the "other," to which the present would be superior.[87] Exoticism, in Labban, goes even further since many visitors seem to head there as if heading to 1920: not to see the Labban of the present, with the small businesses that have flourished around the sisters, but to penetrate past truths, as if Labban was a living archive, a repository of direct evidence from 1920. Here, the othering of the past is, simultaneously, othering of a physical place, sometimes explicitly built on social and moral stigma. Two YouTubers, for instance, emphasize the "awful smell *still* coming from Rayyā and Sakīna's house,"[88] as if smell could be a remnant of a century-old past and stink the embodiment of dreadful memories.[89]

Moreover, when the house-tellers make clear that they cannot offer first-hand accounts of 1920, some outsiders show disappointment, which may turn into skepticism about the very possibility to know the past:

> For sure, we have not found eye-witnesses who saw Rayyā and Sakīna, after almost 100 years. On site there are houses up to 150 years old, but the inhabitants have not penetrated this reality. If they did, if their stones could speak, they would unveil backstories that nobody knows.[90]

Since documentation is discarded as a way to produce knowledge, several journalists and YouTubers show impartiality in a way that recalls 'Ashūr's. They claim not to take side between those who see Rayyā and Sakīna as ruthless criminals and those who consider them anti-colonial fighters. By doing so, they pass over the fact that no evidence supports, so far, the

second version, while negating the possibility of a third one: the sisters were accomplices, whose role was exaggerated by the Egyptian press, in an epoch when female involvement in crime disrupted the image of the ideal woman, the mother of new Egypt, worthy of freeing itself from colonial occupation. The fact that even this version, which seems the most likely today, could be amended tomorrow does not make it equivalent to flawed or groundless versions. Yet the intrinsic instability of historical knowledge might not be reassuring, especially in times of societal crisis, when certainty about the past can help face an uncertain future.

Elaborated from a micro perspective and a Middle Eastern context, this analysis can serve to highlight, more broadly, the tension between documentation and narration as competing ways of reconstructing the past. While having similar pretentions to truth, the two practices show different scopes and paces, and incompatible ethics. At the same time, producers of legitimate and official knowledge cannot be seen as the undisputed tenants of documentation. The resort to narration as a methodological short-cut, more or less deliberately, also emerges in the strategies of cultural institutions, journalists, and even an academically trained historian. Such an institutional disregard for documentation can contribute to legitimizing the same attitude in whoever attempts to rewrite history, if not professionally, in a professional-looking form. Along with a technological environment and a troubled time that encourage speed, this could fuel conspiracist reappraisals of history even without the intention to deliberately oppose official accounts.

Conclusion

The Egyptian case under study reveals the tension between two conflicting approaches to the past: one within the limits of documentation, whose outcomes can be constantly challenged; the other guided by a quest for vividness, whose outcomes, in the absence of external checks, give the impression of undisputable certainty. The diffusion of the latter in times of societal crisis can be explained with the need for stability in unstable times.

A quest for justice also emerged, in the eagerness to undertake a radical renewal of the documentary apparatus based on moral concerns. Once the production of written documents is linked to colonial or corrupt authorities, such documents are discarded in block. The effort of reading them "against the will" of their producers is negated and so is the possibility of cross-examining them in relation to other sources.

More generally, written documents seem to be denied the status of direct evidence, which is recognized to visual sources, allegedly unmediated. This need for immediacy also affects the pace of historical knowledge, making documentation look too slow to be viable, when time speed appears

accelerated by online communication and, in this case, post-revolutionary anxiety.

The quest for immediacy goes even further in the attempt to make the past present. Outsiders head to the Alexandrian district where Rayyā and Sakīna used to live as if heading to direct evidence from 1920. The realization that such a short-cut is deceiving triggers skepticism about the very possibility to know the past.

To conclude, while a boundary subsists between documentation and narration, it does not correspond to a clear-cut division between institutional or academic actors, on the one side, and ordinary citizens, on the other. Citizens might turn to narration while emulating the lack of attention for documentation of some legitimate and even official producers of knowledge. They might do so to fulfill their need for clarity, stability, and justice in troubled times and not necessarily to challenge official accounts of the past.

Such a conclusion calls for a renewed attention to history and its methodology, both inside and outside of academia. A more systematic analysis of the clash between documentation and narration, through specific case studies, would bring more insight into the manipulation of history from above and from below, in and beyond the Middle East. And maybe, a broader awareness of the nature of evidence and the pace of documentation, away from the fetishization of scattered documents, could help disentangle the methodology of conspiracism without demonizing its holders.

Notes

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11 Ute Caumanns and Andreas Önnerfors, "Conspiracy Theories in Visual Culture," in *The Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, eds. Michael Butter and Peter Knight (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2020), 441–456.

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14 Floyd Rudmin, "Conspiracy Theory as Naïve Deconstructive History," 2003, www.psicopolis.com/PSIPOL/arch/conspiracy.htm
15 Shaun Lopez, "Madams, Murders and the Media," in *Re-Envisioning Egypt 1919–1952*, ed. Arthur Goldschmidt et al. (Cairo: AUC Press, 2005), 377.
16 Burke, *Eyewitnessing*, 194.
17 "Ba'd 90 'āman, barā'at Rayyā wa-Sakīna," Rola Kharsa, April 28, 2015, video, www.youtube.com/watch?v=qiz5WsZORSk All the quotes from the press, YouTube, and TV shows in this chapter are translated from Arabic by the author.
18 "Ba'd 90 'āman."
19 "Bi-Wuḍūḥ – barnāmij Bi-Wuḍūḥ – Ḥalqat al-ithnayni bi-ta'rīkh 14-12-2015 – Ḥaqīqat Rayyā wa-Sakīna," Al Hayah TV Network, December 14, 2015, video, www.youtube.com/watch?v=CAkpbefEjZE
20 "Ma'akum Munā al-Shādhilī!! I'ādat fatḥ qaḍiyyat ashhar saffāḥatayn fī ta'rīkh Miṣr Rayyā wa-Sakīna," Mona Elshazly, November 13, 2015, video, www.yout ube.com/watch?v=xk1t91NzRhw
21 "Ba'd 90 'āman."
22 "Ba'd 90 'āman."
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24 "Bi-Wuḍūḥ – barnāmij Bi-Wuḍūḥ."
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33 See Elena Chiti, "National Robin Hoods and Local Avengers," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 34, no. 3 (2021): 517–534.
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44 See Chiti, "National Robin Hoods and Local Avengers."

45 Carlo Ginzburg, *Il filo e le tracce* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2006), 35–36.

46 Ginzburg, *Il filo e le tracce*,19.

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48 Marc Bloch, *Apologie pour l'histoire* (Paris: Colin, 2012), 75.

49 Arnaldo Momigliano, "Ancient History and the Antiquarian," 313.

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51 "Bi-Wuḍūḥ…"

52 Carlo Ginzburg, *Mythes emblèmes traces* (Paris: Verdier, 2010), 218–294.

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61 "Baʿd 90 ʿāman."

62 François Hartog, *Régimes d'Historicité* (Paris: Seuil, 2012), 64.

63 See Elodie Rousselot, "Introduction," in *Exoticizing the Past in Contemporary Neo-Historical Fiction*, ed. Elodie Rousselot (London: Palgrave-MacMillan, 2014).

64 See van Prooijen, "Injustice without Evidence."

65 Isabelle Grangaud et al., eds., "Besoins d'histoire," *L'Année du Maghreb* 10 (2014).

66 Dina Heshmat, *Egypt 1919* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 192.

67 Heshmat, *Egypt 1919*, 182.

68 Gray, *Conspiracy Theories*, 141–144.

69 Birchall, *Knowledge Goes Pop*, 35–41.

70 Caumanns and Önnefors, "Conspiracy Theories in Visual Culture," 453.

71 See Lucie Ryzova, "Unstable Icons, Contested Histories," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 8, no. 1 (2015): 37–68.

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86 "Buyūt Rayyā wa-Sakīna al-ḥaqīqiyya min al-dākhil wa-al-khārij 2019 wa-al-maḥkama wa-makān al-dafn wa-al-ḍaḥāyā wa-ghayru-ha," Mohammed Saeed, January 28, 2019, video, https://youtube.com/watch?v=ahCWzr2t1zE
87 Rousselot, "Introduction," 6–7.
88 "Mā zāla rā'iḥa karīha takhruj," and "Rīḥa karīha kānat ha-tmawwitnī ṭāl'a min manzil Rayyā wi-Sakīna ḥatta al-ān," Kamatsho Vlogs, February 7, 2022, video, www.youtube.com/watch?v=YDLg5CMEUE0
89 Discussing the association between smell, social imaginary, and morals would exceed the scope of this paper. For a historical appraisal in Western contexts, see Alain Corbin, *Le Miasme et la jonquille* (Paris: Flammarion, 1982).
90 "Du'ā' Fārūq takshif."

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3

THE KRISTEVA FILE

John Mowitt

"Theory conspiracy" is a locution whose insistent inversion of the more familiar, "conspiracy theory," invites justification. Is there more at stake here than the linguistic charms of a "Spoonerism?" Without denigrating such charms, the following remarks will argue that valuable insights about both theory and conspiracy stir within the less familiar locution, "theory conspiracy," among them the proposition that "conspiracy theories" are hardly ever "theoretical" in any rigorous sense. At best, they are grand narratives (to re-purpose one of Jean-François Lyotard's *mots d'art*), and as such they draw on affective and literary devices that call for more attention than they typically receive. To investigate this proposition, I turn to the case of what I am calling "the Kristeva file," a collective assemblage of (d) enunciation articulating state documents, theoretical texts (and Kristeva's theoretical bona fides are beyond reproach), magazine articles, interviews, and most emphatically a novel. In the wake of this "investigation," I will be compelled to consider its implications for the role assigned to paranoia, especially as theorized within psychoanalysis, in the grand narrative of conspiracy. Never mind "sometimes." Is it ever just having "all" the facts as William S. Burroughs once averred?[1]

In 2018, we learned from Dimiter Kenarov, on the pages of the *New Yorker*, that Julia Kristeva had a substantial personal file archived by the State Security Forces in Bulgaria.[2] It had apparently escaped the incineration of materials that followed the fall of the Berlin wall and the disintegration of the former East Bloc. According to Kenarov, who, like Kristeva, hails from Sofia, what this file strongly suggested is that Bulgarian State Security had effectively turned Kristeva into an informant, even providing her with the handle, "Sabina" (a strangely non-Bulgarian given name). Predictably, when

confronted with these charges, Kristeva vehemently denied them. In Alice Jardine's satisfying intellectual biography of Kristeva, *Taking the Risk of Thinking*, she combs through this material as if looking for lice and ultimately accepts Kristeva's denial. I have nothing to add to her careful and compelling summary. Instead, and perhaps simply because Kristeva has had her own go at the status of paranoia in the Schreber case (he does a walk-on in the novel I propose to read in these pages), I urge that we dawdle and consider what precisely about a or the theory conspiracy begins to emerge here?

Two leads will be pursued in puzzling over this question. On the one hand, given that Kristeva's Bulgarian heritage, her sense of her affiliation to or with the motherland, is at stake in the accusations made against her, it seems urgent to think about how this heritage is taken up both explicitly and implicitly in her work. What relation, what attachment to Bulgaria is established there? On the other hand—and I have elsewhere considered at length the implications of this locution—it seems equally urgent to consider the distinctive generic character of this work.[3] In several short, quasi-autobiographical pieces, Kristeva has addressed herself to her Bulgarian heritage, indeed to the "suffering" (*souffrance*) that tints her affective relation to it. She has also taken up the affective character of this relation in her fiction, specifically in her detective novel from 2004, *Death in Byzantium*, a component of the collective assemblage of (d)enunciation over which I have proposed to drone. To call this text, or any of her novels (a term whose Bakhtinian hot link to "linguistic homelessness" might have given her pause) "fiction," risks simply ignoring or downplaying details like the presence of a figure named "Julia Kristeva" within them and the inclusion, *im passim*, of numerous formulations that read as straightforward literary theoretical propositions, some familiar others less so.[4] This is hardly surprising, but what it alerts us to is both the question of linking these generic considerations to the heritage ones, and, even more trenchantly, the question of considering in what way "immanent considerations" (*immanenten Betrachtungen*) might serve as a locus for a distinctly, if not uniquely, textual articulation of paranoia. Perhaps, and the matter will be mulled here, the literary critical principle of a text staging its own economy of blindness and insight obliges one to consider how theory might be said to conspire. Not to put too fine a point on it: immanent critiques, perhaps even deconstruction, are always "inside jobs." They presuppose and thus require the collaboration of an investigative reader (whether reparative or suspicious) and marked instances of textual detail that have, in certain cases, escaped the narrator's attention. If texts say more than they mean, and they do, it is because such details escape.

So, let us open the file a further fold. When asked by the editors of the French weekly *Marianne* about the charges made against her by Kenarov, Kristeva, after firmly repudiating them, decided to take up the matter of why they had been made in the first place. If there was absolutely nothing there,

how and why did nothing become something? Reporting on her participation in a colloquium dedicated to her work convened at the University of Sophia in 2002 (thus 16 years prior to *The New Yorker* story), Kristeva responded to what she perceived as the deadlocked discourses structuring Bulgarian political debate. After identifying three tendencies (nostalgia for Soviet rule; a cynical embrace of European aid despite the known tenacity of corruption; and a more aspirational embrace of EU reforms), she adds:

> But during this economic and political stalemate, the ghosts of totalitarianism do not stay hidden away in the police filing cabinets. Those ghosts are invading and filling the public square with resentment. My take on this is Nietzschean: I see it as an incapacity to transform past wounds and current frustrations into action.[5]

In a nutshell (and the term is used knowingly), she was framed by ghosts (maybe even "spooks?"), by incarnations of Nietzschean *ressentiment*. Apart from the intrinsic interest of the gesture itself (muted, but tactical analytical empathy), I wish also to draw attention to the fact that *Murder in Byzantium*, as if setting its own reflexivity among its cast of characters, is haunted by ghosts. The pretext for this haunting is, what else, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and its much-commented figure of the paternal specter who demands of the son that his murder be avenged. The ghostly King Hamlet is evoked in a subheading of Chapter 6 in which our narrator (who knows of "Kristeva" but is not Kristeva) is tracing a tracing. In particular, we are examining the specific interest one of the central characters, Sebastian Chrest/Jones, has in situating Anna Comnena (historical author of the *Alexiad*) within the trajectories of the first Crusade, trajectories that significantly pass through Sofia. The evocation of the paternal specter is framed with textual details worth citing at length.

> Sebastian no longer keeps track of the passage of time. Madame Lebon gives him goosebumps. She is much more ghostlike than the history of the crusaders and Mary's miracles, which have been so irresistible to him for so long. But what is a ghost? "A being condemned to impalpability by death, absence, or a change of habits." Who is a ghost? Ebrand who didn't dare make love to Anna, or Sebastian who dared strangle Fa? And who condemns him to the realm of the ungraspable? Crime, absence or modern habits, hypocrite policemen of primary drives, ones, moreover, that don't ask permission to come to the surface or sometimes even to be released? Who is Ebrand? The ghost of an ideal Sebastian.[6]

The reference to Shakespeare follows, clarifying that ghosts address themselves to sons, or more generally to survivors. Written 15 years before

she is denounced by Kenarov as a Bulgarian informant, but only 2 years after the colloquium in Sofia, the rhetorical resonances here, most obviously in the very figure of the ghost, but also in the evocation of the lethal machinations of the police, pre-echo/pre-dispose her response to the editors of *Marianne* cited above.

But who precisely is Sebastian Chrest/Jones? He is a character in a detective novel who is cast as a scholar interested in the figure of Anna Comnena and as such the putative source for much of the archival material presented in the text on the history of the Crusades. For much of the novel, he is sought as a murder suspect by the reporter, Stephanie Delacour, a figure who passes through Kristeva's detective novels and is acknowledged by her and her readers as her novelesque stand-in. As such folds might suggest, Chrest/Jones (anagrammatically Chrestiva, Julia), Crusades, Delacour and Kristeva herself all incarnate the logic given voice to when, in another interview, Kristeva explains that *Murder in Byzantium* took root in one of her father's jokes. A *Witz* about "how our family name, Kristev, which means Delacroix (of the cross), means that we are descended from the crusaders." This insistent doubling, mediated through the name of the father—although interesting in itself—invites further consideration of a point raised earlier, namely the presence and function of Kristeva's patronym, indeed the character "Julia Kristeva," in *Murder in Byzantium*.

For those unfamiliar with the text a quick sketch. The story of this novel concerns a serial killer, variously named Number 8, the "Purifier," or Xiao Chang, who is preying on an esoteric sect, The New Pantheon, a killer whose crimes are being investigated by a commissioner of police and a reporter from a Parisian weekly. The action unfolds in a non-lieu named Santa Varvara where, among other things, is to be found Sebastian Chrest/Jones whose scholarly relation to the Crusades is literally re-traced as the story's plot unfolds. As this might suggest, many familiar Kristevean theoretical touchstones—notably that of the foreigner/stranger within—are evoked, even deployed, in the course of this investigation. But at two moments, "Kristeva" is expressly named as a person-of-interest to the narrator's discourse. Only one of these is worth droning over as it helps us think about what constitutes the possible "inside" of the fiction and thereby the matter of how theory animates the logic of infiltration, the inside job, or fifth column. The narrator here is Stephanie Delacour, the dead author's trans-textual double:

> We understand each other, you and me. I listen to Le Pen and Sarko too. And I have heard the same from Kristeva speaking at the Arab World Institution—a foreigner diagnosing the new maladies of the soul, as she calls them, maladies that afflict immigrants more than others, according to her. […] She told them that the world's migrants and homeless who

have fled their mother languages and are excluded from those of their adopted countries spontaneously become addicts, false non-beings, and prey to psychosomatic illnesses and delinquencies. […] With no seat belts or guardrails, all foreigners, myself included, are subject to all excesses, explained the psychiatrist at the Arab World Institute. Unless they make up some false forms of protection: Homesickness […], a newfound and more fervent religious devotion, fundamentalism etc. Thus newly constituted, the foreigner's only remaining task is to sabotage the false personality that accidentally existed before.[7]

At the foot of the page where these remarks appear, the translator introduces his one and only note, clarifying that Le Pen and Sarkosy are "real" political figures struggling for electoral power; one hysterically anti-immigrant, the other himself of immigrant heritage.[8] Such nugatory clarifications aside, what the note accomplishes—and it is specific to the translation—is a "reality effect." It points emphatically, if crookedly, outward from within. However, unlike Flaubert's barometer or Bond's phone, the apparently gratuitous signified of "realism" is here the editorial apparatus *itself*. Imagine the words, "*this* is a book," floating in large, muted gray letters behind the note. As such, a provocative chiasmus, a criss/cross, emerges where author, character, genre, and medium trace the edge, the limit between what can no longer easily be distinguished as inside and outside *this* fiction. The materiality of this book—and specifically an English translation of an author in the theory "stable" of Columbia University Press (Kritzman's European Perspectives series)—props up this story and its *dramatis personae*. What I will call a hermeneutics of detection engulfs the circuit of reading and writing, placing an acute accent on the motif of "sabotage" that appears in the passage upon which the note comments.

This term, plucked from the history of the workers' movement in France, is not gratuitous. It seems directly motivated by what in the cited passage is presented as "Julia Kristeva's" theory of the foreigner. Sabotage is what defines the foreigner's relation to its previously false personality. Sabinotage? Hmm. Now, to be clear, it is not my aim to suggest that *Murder in Byzantium* is a pre-emptive compulsive confession to espionage charges yet to be lodged against Kristeva, and this despite her persistent acknowledgment that in turning to French she was "betraying" her Bulgarian heritage. Nor, for that matter, is it to endorse Laurent Binet's powers of clairvoyance when, in *The Seventh Function of Language*, he situates Kristeva at the head of a Bulgarian cabal behind the "murder" of Roland Barthes. Instead, what interests me here is the way this text stages the inscription and role of theory in fiction so as to ascribe to it a precise conspiratorial function. Theory at once thinks the puzzle of the inside, while operating from within the resulting spatial ambiguity as a fifth column, an infiltrator who or that allows readers to

name what menaces a constitutively paranoid will to know, a will to figure out whodunit.

Now, it may strike one as a bit of a stretch to thread paranoia directly into the generic shadings of detective fiction but consider that Kristeva herself encourages such calisthenics in formulating the distinctive generic character of *Murder in Byzantium*. In response to a question from Pierre-Louis Fort about the "intensely personal" character of the text, she invokes a distinction between novels of the ego and novels of the subject, adding:

> What's the difference? The Ego reassures itself through display, the exhibition of its minidramas, while the subject's intimacy is diffracted into a mosaic of confessions, associations, and slips that destabilize the Ego's certainties as well as others—the reader's. The subject's intimacy pierces through to that of others (characters are split, twinned, there are doubles, projections, there is a loss of self in crime, but also in serenity—*Murder in Byzantium* is woven of this. […] If I feel more at ease in the novel of the subject than in the novel of the Ego is it because of psychoanalysis? Or is it because of history which made me an immigrant of Bulgarian origin, French nationality, European citizenship and American adoption?[9]

Here, yet another pass over the matter of her status as a foreigner—later invoked in the same interview to explain why her fiction is refused entry to the "temple of literature" in France—is here presented as tied to the specific generic character of that fiction. She doesn't write novels of the Ego, she writes novels of the subject. Apparently, the temple conspires to admit only the former. I will return to the matter, but it seems pertinent to note that the novel of the subject is actually conceived along bluntly Lacanian lines, that is, consistent with his theory of the imaginary it produces a divided and thus shared intimacy with the other, an intimacy that in infiltrating the locus of the reader, comes to enervate what earlier I called the hermeneutics of detection. Under circumstances such as these, it is perhaps not surprising that the theory of fiction came, in the hands of Wayne Booth and at the height of the Cold War, to thematize the "reliability" of the narrator. What does the narrator know, what is she not sharing, what does the narrator know about me, the reader whether implied or not? Why exactly would we care? It's fiction.

Of equal importance in the cited passage is the way it segues directly to her status as a Bulgarian immigrant. As noted before, Bulgaria and the capital city of Sofia (about which she has also written) loom large in *Murder in Byzantium*, indeed its status in relation to the trajectories of the first Crusade serves to geo-locate one of Kristeva's several crossovers, Sebastian Chrest-Jones as he re-traces the whereabouts of Anna Comnena. This is both an invocation and thematization of history that Kristeva offers up as

an alternative to psychoanalysis as the explanation of her preference for the novel of the subject, that is, to her own novel. Strictly speaking, however, this is not, in fact, an alternative because the "or" is inclusive not exclusive. History is read psychoanalytically not only within this novel, but also in the work of the speaker at the Arab Institute named "Julia Kristeva." It operates in the novel to backlight the real, perhaps even secret meaning of every proposition that is uttered by Stephanie Delacour and the other characters. It is drawn on to explain fundamentalism, racism, and [spoiler alert] the act of terrorism with which the novel concludes. In this, it incites a conspiratorial fantasy in relation to which one's paranoid entanglement in the structure of the Other acquires its real significance. The subject's troubled sense that something greater than it is at work within it finds pardon if not resolution in naming that something as *conspiracy*. Something or someone knows what needs to be known. In *Murder in Byzantium*, this *is* the theory of psychoanalysis. It operates to rattle the fiction, not by opposing it as fact, but by corroding this very distinction, perpetrating what I have called the "inside" job; that is, not just a job perpetrated from within, but the job of producing the difference in relation to which the "inside" refers to something or somewhere. Provocatively, *Murder in Byzantium* re-states this topographic perplexity in an ethical register more immediately associated with Dostoevsky. The register of criminality.

In a late exchange between two characters in the novel, we read the line, "you know well that we're all more or less criminals."[10] It echoes and thus underscores the earlier line, "The Kafka-like art of taking one step to the side, of not quite adhering, of beating one's head, of questioning the questions, of not forgetting one's crimes [.]"[11] Taken together such formulations remind us that the paranoid delusion that one has always already committed the crime of what Lacan once called "inmixing" can be calmed, if not neutralized, through the theory that teaches the axiom of structural aggressivity. We are all; we are both. The reader is thus no longer just a double, but a rival, a stalker. In light of this, would we—specifically as readers of a novel of the subject—not expect to find an explicitly shared crime suturing reality and its novelesque, that is metaleptic, effects? We do and it is here.

As if channeling one of her mentors, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Kristeva inserts within the narration of *Murder in Byzantium* a learned taxonomy of butterflies. This is motivated by the narrator, here Stephanie Delacour, who is tracing Sebastian Chrest/Jones's quest for Ana Comnena. Recall that Delacour and Chrest/Jones are acknowledged doubles of Julia Kristeva the dead author. On the page preceding the taxonomy, we are told Sebastian loved to collect, "with the pride of a killer,"[12] butterflies. Immediately following the taxonomy, we learn that Sebastian mounted his specimens by "pinching their little heads, first crushing their eyes"[13] a gesture identical to the one by which he murders his assistant Fa Chang, the daughter of Xiao

Chang, the Purifier, the target of the mad research drive of the novel. The discourse of racist misogyny audibly trembles here as its sound system is conspicuously turned up. It is then striking, to say the least, that when in the interview with Fort she says this when asked about the novel's fidelity to her experience of kinship and origins:

> If what results is a novel of origins, it is not really an inquiry into the source, to be glorified, but a composition—recomposition of the subject. Through Sebastian and Stephanie, both who resemble me, but are complete strangers to me (I have never killed anyone, *except for a few butterflies*, and I am not a journalist at *L'Evénement de Paris*, for example), I am speaking of myself as if I were another.[14]

The final independent clause goes without saying for reasons of theory. What nevertheless is worth saying, in effect repeating, is that Sebastian's most coveted butterfly is one called, "Imago."[15]

Readers familiar with the history of psychoanalysis will "hear" in the reference to "imago" an allusion to the journal *American Imago* launched by Freud and Hans Sachs in 1939, a year after the fateful Hitler/Stalin pact and just as Freud has migrated to Britain. It is also an open evocation of the "imaginary" (*imago* as Latin for image) and thus the ontological structure of paranoia in Lacan's metapsychological, that is theoretical, discourse. As such, Sebastian's butterfly (*larva*?) would appear also to molt into a figure of the insistent, perhaps compulsive, role of psychoanalysis in *Murder in Byzantium*. Sebastian Chrest/Jones, and/or "Julia Kristeva," covets an *imago*. In relation to this theory, one might argue that the literary text stages the presence of a drive at work within it that generates conspiracy as the reason, the cause for a paranoia that it can neither contain nor quell. Theory here is thereby cast as conspiring to expose the literary writer (Barthes's *scriptor*) as a subject who knows not what it does, and who is thereby capable of anything, including murder and, in principle, espionage. One might then observe that both conspiracy theories and theory conspiracies only really become legible through something called literature and especially the mode of reading it calls for. In the absence of such a reading practice, conspiracy is always and everywhere simply a plot with or without a story. Ubiquitous and numbing, smooth.

To be sure, there is no convenient homology between theory and its metapsychological iteration within psychoanalysis, but one might argue that more than Kristeva's passionate ambivalence regarding her Lacanian inheritance advocates for its pertinence in approaching the hermeneutics of detection at work in *Murder in Byzantium*. There are, of course thematic reasons for this, all trafficking in the connection between the need-to-know (what Burroughs meant by "all the facts") and the anxious engine of this

need (what Freud once named the *Forschungstrieb*). Like the gods invoked by many to explain and placate natural forces, conspiracies populate beliefs with agents whose works account for the deep reasons of the unknown. As such, conspiracy and paranoia touch if not converge, but in ways that Kristeva's novels have suggested are more obtuse than obvious.

Those who have followed the many decades of Lacan's research seminars will know that already in the 1950s he had begun to cast doubt on any sharp distinction between the drive and its object and, in doing so, rooted the subject's constitutively specular researches in paranoia. If, as he argued in seminar three on "The Psychoses," the speaking subject is alienated in its very constitution and thus immanently entangled with and in the other, the difference between a scholar and Daniel Paul Schreber (Freud's illustrious client) was only a matter of degree, not kind. This other, specifically in its capitalization, that is, the Other recognized but not known, emerges as the structural and thus quintessential conspiratorial object, and if Lacan's observations remain pertinent, it is because they oblige us to consider that conspiracies, to the precise extent that they are paranoically driven, require the existence of speaking subjects to operate. This presumably is also part of what differentiates a novel of the ego from a novel of the subject, to re-state Kristeva's distinction, the latter shaped intimately by the blatantly conspiratorial figure of the "ghost," the one who returns and dis-lodges.

A detail not sufficiently stressed about this psychoanalytical material arises in the seminar presentation from June 6, 1956, the seminar better known by its title, "The Quilting Point." It is one that complicates but significantly extends the merely thematic encounter between psychoanalysis and the structural logic of conspiracy. In this session, Lacan embarks on the second extended reading (the first being Freud's case history on Schreber) that structures the seminar on "The Psychoses," namely, his commentary on Racine's last play, "Athaliah." Motivating this turn is his desire to, as he puts it at one point, "investigate," Saussure's account of the signifier via the staged drama. Presented in 1956, so two years into the Algerian War for Independence, and two years before de Gaulle's instantiation of the Fifth Republic, the commentary on Racine is actually less interesting on the matter of the signifier than is Lacan's recourse to the rhetoric of intelligence gathering as the medium of his demonstration. Interpreting a character's decision to turn against his family as being attracted to "The Resistance" (capitalized), Lacan summarizes his hesitations about the linguistic signifier in the following terms.

The power of the signifier, the effectiveness of this word *fear* [in the expression "the fear of god"], has been to transform the *zeal* at the beginning [of the scene], with everything that is ambiguous, doubtful, always liable to be reversed, that this word conveys, into the *faithfulness*

of the end. This transmutation is of the order of the signifier as such. No accumulation, no superimposition, no summation of meanings, is sufficient to justify it. The entire progress of the scene, which would otherwise be worthy of the *Deuxième Bureau*, resides in the transmutation of the situation through the intervention of the signifier.[16]

Deuxième Bureau? Grigg tells us only that this is a reference to "The French Secret Service," a helpful but inadequate observation. The *Deuxième Bureau* was established by the French military during the Paris Commune as an intelligence gathering unit. It was profoundly reorganized as part of the Armistice that concluded hostilities in 1945 but resurrected during the Algerian War for Independence as an espionage unit expressly linking cryptography to intelligence gathering. An earlier "like" of Norbert Wiener in the seminar tells the reader that Lacan is certainly interested in information, coding, and intelligent machines (he had lectured on cybernetics at one of his early seminars), so this likely motivates his otherwise oblique invocation of the *Deuxième Bureau*. But he is doing so in 1956. He is reading Racine's attention to the transmutation of fear into faith as an exemplary incarnation of a signifier not merely "arbitrarily" bonded to its signified. It is telling that in a professional address delivered later that same year, "The Situation of Psychoanalysis and the Training of Psychoanalysts in 1956," Lacan not only returns to the material efficacy of the signifier, but when pivoting to the theme of training (a highly personal theme), he also spends considerable time sketching the "Secret Committee" devised by Ernst Jones and approved by Freud to preserve and transmit his teachings, teachings that as curated by his daughter among others, later excommunicated (Lacan's word choice) Lacan from the International Psychoanalytic Association altogether.[17] That this committee was deliberately comprised of trusted Jewish analysts—Jones himself was the exception; Jung was untrusted—returned as the repressed in the 1930s when a clinical practice with tangled roots in Viennese Hasidism was systematically suppressed as a "Jewish Science." The structure of Freudian orthodoxy—and this is vital—is implicitly thus deemed conspiratorial. Lacan, in his critique of Jones' theory of symbolism from 1959, and at the risk of self-implication, makes it difficult to come to other conclusions. Theory, elaborated from clinical practice, is transmitted and sustained through teaching. Teaching must be secured from deviation and corruption. Theory secures itself through training by producing an immanent link between its tenets and tenants. The etymological image of conspiracy—breathing together in the dark—here returns as an emblem of training. And, as Pierre Schaeffer reminded us many years ago, psychoanalysis was not the only theoretical tradition tempted by the cultic practices of Pythagoras.

Read sociographically these observations invite us to listen for the ricocheting echoes between the theory of the signifier in its constitutive

relation to the speaking subject, the institutional history of psychoanalysis in Europe, and the political reorganization of the intelligence services of colonial France. Such echoes not only complicate the work of socio-historical contextualization (what caused which effect?), but they also invite us to consider how theory (here Lacanian metapsychology) is at once the object and the subject of conspiracy. In this, theory behaves like knowledge in my earlier point about paranoia which is thus both the substance and the aim of knowing. But left at that it may seem extravagant to link theory and conspiracy, as if its more practical, more ordinary, conspiratorial character was thereby made explicit.

Consider, in this context, that in the wake of the events of May 1968, Lacan's theoretical innovations, notably his systematization of the "four discourses" (that of the university, the analyst, the master, and the hysteric) emerged as the underpinning of one of the animating interventions of what was named by a partisan—Bernard-Henri Lévy—*les nouveaux philosophes*. Specifically, on the pages of Christian Jambet's and Guy Lardreau's *L' Ange* (the Angel) from 1976, Lacan's concept of the Master was elaborated as an ontological reiteration of Albert Camus' figure, in *Man in Revolt*, of the Rebel. At stake was a structural break between revolution/revolt and order, or what Jambet and Lardreau baptized, the *c'est comme ça* (the way it is). Although presented as an elaboration of Maoist philosophy, the Angel mattered because, in ways vaguely like Benjamin's figure of the "angel of history," it indexed a political reality against which Marxism could be found lacking. In short, the Angel embodied (so, more than represented) a revolutionary desire that both transcendentally agitated human existence and allowed us to recognize that Soviet Marxism, in all its global variants, could but betray the revolution by re-instating yet another Master. In fact, in the hands of Lévy and Glucksmann, Marxism could not be differentiated from Nazism in its political cynicism and cannibalism (its desire to immolate human bodies). Their tendentious conflation of camps and gulags finds its warrant in such conclusions.

Lacan's account of the Master, specifically as a discourse (and here he appeared to be re-purposing Foucault's contemporaneous concept), is worked out in seminar seventeen, *L'Envers de la psychoanalyse* (not only the hell [*enfer*], but also the inverse [*inverse*] of psychoanalysis) where it is clear that Lacan is at once trying to fix the terms of his teaching/training, and posing the question: so what *is* and what *is not* psychoanalysis. What is its opposite? Jambet and Lardreau reappropriate the energy of this confrontation by posing the theoretical and political question: what is the opposite of Marxism? They respond: the Angel, that is, the non-Master. They show little or no interest in Lacan's other discourses which, taken as a logical configuration, nuance the ontological status of the Master who (that?), after all, is a pure discursive construct. Lacan, despite always trolling for potential

allies, seems not to have made much of this reading of *L' Envers*. It is thus intriguing, given the issues raised by the locution, "theory conspiracy," that others, notably the government of the United States, regarded this reading, or more specifically the movement it heralded as clearly worth of attention.

Relevant here is the fact that so-called French Theory (once a virtual pleonasm) was the direct object of intelligence gathering by the Central Intelligence Agency *precisely* during the short-lived efflorescence of *les nouveaux philosophes*. The opening paragraph of the "sanitized report" titled, "France: Defection of the Leftist Intellectuals," and released in 2011 (so well after the "facts" upon which it reports) reads:

> There is a new climate of intellectual opinion in France—a spirit of anti-Marxism and anti-Sovietism that will make it difficult for anyone to mobilize significant opposition to US policies. Nor will French intellectuals be likely to lend their weight, as they did before, to other West European colleagues who have become hostile to the United States on broad issues like disarmament.[18]

After briskly mischaracterizing Foucault as "an anthropologist" (maybe the writer got the figures in Maurice Henry's well-known cartoon reversed?), the report turns to a history of French intellectuals from the Dreyfus Affair, to the Mitterrand presidency. Lévy and friends enter as the writer attempts to hang some meat on the bones of the "new opinion" noted in the report summary from which I have cited. There is no apparent awareness of the intricate and sustained critical engagement with Marxism that long precedes *les nouveau philosophes*, an engagement one would characterize as flatly "anti-Marxist" only under duress. But this is not really the point. The content of the report, granted highly sanitized (pages are missing), invites easy derision, but its *existence*, and specifically its belief that French Theory works against the interests of US policy in Europe and therefore invites surveillance forges an explicit link between theory and conspiracy that invites and invigorates the less familiar "theory conspiracy" locution. It is not uninteresting that here we are dealing with "intelligence," with, as Burroughs said, having all the facts, and while this might urge that we cast the link between theory and conspiracy as predictable—like the hammer and its nail, intelligence discovers the warrants for its paranoia—one must draw such conclusions thoughtfully. If, as I have proposed, conspiracy is the imaginary solution to paranoid agitation, and said agitation is ontologically tangled in the structure of the speaking subject, what is then interesting is not the predictable, but the provocation that escapes it. Here this provocation bears on the matter of agency that resists theorization in the grand narratives of conspiracy theory.

To end on a partisan note. Among the several things that irritate casual or even hostile readers of theory, is the discursive tendency to attribute agency

to it. Theory critiques x or y (or both). Theory changes "everything" (Paul de Man's characterization of the importance of Derrida's *Of Grammatology*) etc. While I appreciate the point about hallucinatory agentic qualities, this chapter, expressly in the reading of the "Kristeva File," has risked the ire of theory haters to consider that theory conspires, or, put differently, that theory achieves its effects through a process that can be provocatively characterized as conspiratorial. *Conspiratio*, breathing together in the dark, is not typically invoked as a way to describe the act of reading a text, but then again white, first world adolescence is replete with images of readers curled around books reading by flashlight under blankets. Though hugely pertinent, the version of the act of reading is not precisely where I have concentrated my attention. Instead, through an expressly testy reading of *Murder in Byzantium*, I sought to tease out how it conspires to pose, in advance (in a pseudo-confessional mode) versions of the questions she was later obliged to engage when accused of having served as an intelligence asset for the Bulgarian secret service in the 1960s. More specifically, when I write "it conspires," I mean here to indicate specifically those elements of the novel that pair metafictional reflexivity and psychoanalytical conceptualizations that "interpret" events in the plot, thus involving, via the mechanics of a hermeneutics of detection, the reader's desire to know in the text's coherence. In effect, the novel reads itself while attributing that reading to psychoanalytically charged figures of characters posing as authors. Above and beyond what this might tell us about the novel (otherwise, frankly, best left outside the "temple of literature"), it invites us to consider that if a theory can conspire within and upon the terrain of literary language, then perhaps its relation to conspiracy is not as straightforward as it might otherwise appear. Neither conspiracy theory as a topical treatment with socio-political implications, nor theory conspiracy as a weaponization of theoretical reflection. Something different. Something that only the literary text can put before us.

Notes

1 Often repeated but seldom cited (indeed I know of no specific citation) Burroughs is said to have typed, among other gnomic utterances, the sentence to which I am referring here. It reads: "Sometimes paranoia is just having all the facts." My sense of its connotative richness will emerge in what follows.
2 Dimiter Kenarov, "Was the Philosopher Julia Kristeva a Cold War Collaborator?" *The New Yorker*, September 5, 2018, www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/was-the-philosopher-julia-kristeva-a-cold-war-collaborator
3 John Mowitt, "On the One Hand, and the Other," *College Literature* 42, no. 2 (Spring 2015): passim.
4 Worthy of note here is Kristeva's central role in bringing Bakhtin's work (especially that on Dostoevsky and Rabelais) to the attention of French academic debate. In the early 1970s, she wrote two short pieces, one a review, "Word, Dialogue, Novel," another a preface, "The Ruin of a Poetics" teasing

out differently the implications of his concepts of dialogue, polyphony, and heteroglossia for those in France and elsewhere working on literary or poetic language. In Julia Kristeva's "The Ruin of a Poetics," her preface to Isabelle Kolitchoff's French translation of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Kristeva, seeking to establish Bakhtin's credentials as a post-Formalist, insisted upon tracing the extent to which the latter's conception of the word was consistent with a certain reading of Lacan, and this despite the fact that, as she puts it, "the book contains not a single reference to psychoanalysis" ("The Ruin of a Poetics," in *Russian Formalism*, eds. S. Bann and J. E. Bowlt [Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1973], 109). The uncanny doubling implied here hints at a register of her relation to psychoanalytic theory woven into her distinct appropriation of the novel as a generic practice. I will argue that this thread is worth unraveling. The parenthetically cited phrase, "linguistic homelessness," in its obvious riff off Lukács' "transcendental homelessness (*Abdachlosigkeit*)," derives from Bakhtin's 1935 essay, "Discourse in the Novel" ("Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist [Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981], 367).

5 Julia Kristeva, "Bulgaria, Post-Totalitarian Europe and Me," *The Philosophical Salon*, November 26, 2018. https://thephilosophicalsalon.com/bulgaria-post-totalitarian-europe-and-me/

6 Julia Kristeva, *Murder in Byzantium*, trans. C. Jon Delogu (New York: Columbia UP, 2004), 204–205.

7 Kristeva, *Murder in Byzantium*, 66–67.

8 This discussion, predictably, evokes the quandary formulated in Italian as *traduttore, traditore* (translator/traitor). It invites a consideration of the "minor differences" that might define the relation between the conspirator and traitor, and for that matter, the entire problematic embodied in Jorge Luis Borges' character, Pierre Menard (created while at "war" with Argentine Nazi sympathizers in the thirties), but this will take us far afield.

9 Julia Kristeva, *Hatred and Forgiveness*, trans. Jeanine Herman (New York: Columbia UP, 2010), 273–274.

10 Kristeva, *Murder in Byzantium*, 193.

11 Kristeva, *Murder in Byzantium*, 86.

12 Kristeva, *Murder in Byzantium*, 161.

13 Kristeva, *Murder in Byzantium*, 162.

14 Kristeva, *Hatred and Forgiveness*, 291; my emphasis.

15 Kristeva, *Murder in Byzantium*, 162.

16 Jacques Lacan, *The Psychoses 1955–1956*, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), 39.

17 Phyllis Grosskurth, *The Secret Ring: Freud's Inner Circle and the Politics of Psychoanalysis* (London: Jonathan Cape Editions, 1991), 19.

18 "France: Defection of the Leftist Intellectuals," *Directorate of Intelligence*, May 13, 2011. www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP86S00588R000300380001-5.pdf, v

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4

A PORTRAIT OF BAUDELAIRE AS A CONSPIRACY THEORIST

Brian O'Keeffe

For Andy Bliss

In 1850, a certain Adolphe Chenu published *Les Conspirateurs*, a memoir of his participation in the febrile and murky world of police informers, secret societies, and proletarian plotters in France during the February Revolution of 1848. Chenu's book would perhaps only interest historians of that agitated era of French politics, but what is notable is that it detained the attention of none other than Karl Marx. For, in the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* in 1850, he reviewed *Les Conspirateurs* along with the pamphlets of Lucien de la Hodde, a police spy. But what is particularly notable is that Walter Benjamin quotes a portion from Marx's text at the beginning of his 1938 essay "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire." Why would Benjamin lead off with a quotation from Marx? The short answer is that Benjamin seeks to profile Charles Baudelaire as someone resembling Chenu, namely a conspirator. A bohemian conspirator, moreover (the essay's first section is titled "The Bohème"), and thus politically blasé, archly amused by ideological zeal and partisanship, but still keen on the in-the-know secretiveness of those who view politics as a gigantic plot, a hoax for the gullible.

A portrait of Baudelaire as a conspirator or conspiracy theorist, then. This is the topic of my chapter. "To evoke the physiognomy of Baudelaire," writes Benjamin, "means to speak of the way in which he resembles this political type."[1] Benjamin's portrait is the focus of the present chapter, but since it's launched by a quotation from Marx, it will not be remiss, I hope, to firstly discuss Marx's review. The key interest of the text is Marx's uneasy registration that people like Chenu are *"professional conspirators."*[2] What

caste or cabal of people are these? Marx speaks of "professional conspirators who devoted their whole energy to the conspiracy and had their living from it."[3] "With the development of proletarian conspiracies," Marx writes moreover, "the need arose for a division of labor."[4] Many proletarians, Marx explains, are "*conspirateurs d'occasion*, i.e. workers who engaged in conspiracy alongside their other employment."[5] Thus, "proletarian conspiracy naturally affords them only very limited and uncertain means of subsistence. They are therefore constantly obliged to dip into the cash-boxes of the conspiracy."[6] Conspiratorial secret societies seemingly provide a welfare system, albeit administered by professionals—those salaried by conspiracy, paid full-time and funded by the subscription fees the part-time proletarians contribute. Presumably proletarians can't work full-time for the conspiracy—they're otherwise occupied by the oppressive business of having to *work*.

What social class do these professional conspirators belong to? Are they proletarians, or do they belong to a more indistinct class? The murky business of conspiracy attracts many dubious characters, and they all end up belonging to "that social category which in Paris is known as *la bohème*."[7] *La bohème:* a motley crew composed of those whose social class is hard to specify. Are they proletarians? Disaffected bourgeois? It's difficult to know, and that's Marx's problem. Perturbed that bohemians cannot be classified, nor their political ideology fixed, Marx finds that

> these democratic bohemians of proletarian origin—there are also democratic bohemians of bourgeois origin, democratic loafers and *piliers d'estaminet*—are therefore either workers who have given up their work and have as a consequence become dissolute, or characters who have emerged from the lumpenproletariat and bring all the dissolute habits of that class with them into their new way of life.[8]

A messy mélange: proles and bohemians mix together, democratic loafers corrupt workers into giving up the dignity of work and induce them into a dissolute, wastrel existence. Note how the lumpenproletariat isn't exactly the kind of proletariat Marx approves of. And note where that problematic mixing takes place: at the prop of a bar. Imagine those *piliers d'estaminet*, those dive-bar regulars recruiting for the ideological cause by buying multiple rounds of drinks. Marx writes:

> The whole way of life of these professional conspirators has a most decidedly bohemian character. Recruiting sergeants for the conspiracy, they go from *marchand de vin* to *marchand de vin*, feeling the pulse of the workers … cajoling them into the conspiracy, and getting either the society's treasury or their new friends to foot the bill for the liters inevitably consumed in the process.[9]

So here is a caste of boozy professionals enlisting workers into the giddy business of conspiracy. But the question, for Marx, is what role such characters ought to play in the fomenting of *revolution*. Do we want revolution to depend on professional agitators or do we want it led by genuine proletarians? And how to discriminate proper revolution from mere conspiracy anyway? "These conspirators," Marx writes, "do not confine themselves to the general organizing of the revolutionary proletariat."[10] Perhaps conspirators *should* limit themselves to organizing the revolutionary proletariat—the tag "revolutionary" is now working hard to distinguish the proletariat Marx approves of from the lumpenproletariat which is too easily seduced into drunken dissolution (or democratic idleness).

Marx speaks of "all movements which were to a greater or lesser extent arbitrarily provoked by coteries,"[11] but later insists that, during the February days, the proletarians were the driving force, and, notably, stresses that "the proletarian masses … were outside any coterie."[12] It would be preferable that the proletarian masses remain entirely apart from such coteries, and that their interests—their revolutionary interests—not rest on the *arbitrary* decisions of a clique of professional agitators. Marx continues, speaking of the members of these coteries as follows:

> It is precisely their business to anticipate the process of revolutionary development, to bring it artificially to crisis-point, to launch a revolution on the spur of the moment, without the conditions for a revolution. For them the only condition for revolution is the adequate preparation of their conspiracy. They are the alchemists of the revolution and are characterized by exactly the same chaotic thinking and blinkered obsessions as the alchemists of old. They leap at inventions which are supposed to work revolutionary miracles: incendiary bombs, destructive devices of magic effect.[13]

Conspiracy professionals resemble alchemists—they think that some destructive "magic" will do the trick. They launch revolution on the spur of the moment, at the moment of a bomb-throw. This is too casual for Marx: while the job of these professionals is to detect the propitious moment for revolution, "without the conditions for a revolution" implies a failure to lay the groundwork. A revolution must be prepared-for, rather than *artificially* provoked by the sudden success of mere conspiracy. Of professional conspirators, Marx therefore complains that, "occupied with such scheming, they have no other purpose than the most immediate one of overthrowing the existing government and have the profoundest contempt for the more theoretical enlightenment of the proletariat about their class interests."[14] We need our professional conspiracy theorists, Marx seems to admit, but revolution shouldn't be the casual outcome of intrigue, plotting,

and "magic." For that's unserious, it's too redolent of the bohemian dilettantism of so-called professionals. Revolution should be achieved not by an alchemy of the bomb but by patient, theoretical attention to the dialectical logic of history as it intersects with the class interests of the proletariat.

At stake, in Marx's review, is this: Marx needs to purge the proletarian class of this professional coterie even as he admits that revolutionary change might indeed be sparked by those professionals. At best, the professional conspirator's job is to be on the look-out for the chance for revolution. At worst, these professionals are salaried bohemians, dilettantes, and alchemists. And drunks. Imagine the cast of characters from Henri Murger's *Scenes of Bohemian Life* tottering off, one evening after closing time, to drunkenly foment revolution. Moreover, Marx worries that this coterie of professional conspirators is too easily infiltrated by the police—the conspirator turns double-agent, becomes a *mouchard*—a stool-pigeon. This motivates Marx's remarks on de la Hodde, who "attempts to portray himself after the manner of the spy in Cooper's novel."[15] While Fenimore Cooper symptomatically emerges in Marx's text (as he often does in Balzac, moreover, another writer fond of conspiracy plots), contemporary readers might think instead of Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, of Verloc the conspiratorial radical who might be a secret agent, or of G. K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday* where all the conspirators are in the service of the police (or God). De la Hodde's text should be entitled, Marx says, *The Disillusioned Policeman*,[16] adding that it "demonstrates that a true revolution is the exact opposite of the ideas of a *mouchard*, who like the 'men of action' sees in every revolution the work of a small coterie."[17] The problem, however, is that Marx isn't sure one can *exactly oppose* true revolution from mere conspiracy, any more than one can claim that the proletarian masses are immune from infiltration by coteries of bohemian schemers and professional agitators—men of action or activists— heedless of theory and dialectical philosophy, and too hasty in their recourse to the explosive alchemies of gelignite, TNT, and the firebomb.

Baudelaire, the Bohemian Conspirator

Now let's broach Benjamin's essay and recall that the first section, titled "The Bohème," immediately cites Marx—Benjamin reproduces the portion where Marx distinguishes the part-timers from the full-time conspirators and associates such dubious characters to *la bohème*. Then Benjamin observes, of Napoleon III, that "as Emperor, Napoleon continued to develop his conspiratorial habits. Surprising proclamations and mystery-mongering, sudden sallies, and impenetrable irony were part of the *raison d'état* of the Second Empire."[18] The Second Empire was itself a conspiratorial regime, a perfect environment for professional conspirators to flourish, therefore, whether in opposition to that Empire

or in its secret service. But what of Baudelaire? If Benjamin can invoke Marx, and observe that "ultimately, Baudelaire's political insights do not go beyond those of these professional conspirators,"[19] then what Benjamin proposes is a fascinatingly suggestive way of understanding Baudelaire the man, his poems, and his poetics.

Benjamin's portrait of Baudelaire as a conspirator not only adds to but also displaces the Baudelaire we're familiar with—poet of modernity, dandified *flâneur*, poetician of evil, devotee of the debased muses of Paris like ragpickers and prostitutes, author of those ambiguous paeans to misery, poverty, alcoholism, and dirt. But would the characterization of Baudelaire as a conspiracy theorist shed new light on the writer we thought we knew? Few scholars have taken up Benjamin's invitation to shed the tenebrous light of conspiracy-mongering over Baudelaire, but one who does is Peter Sloterdijk. For, in *Critique of Cynical Reason*—a text full of reflections on conspiracy and paranoia—Sloterdijk has a section entitled "Theory of the Double Agent" and mentions Benjamin's "cunning interpretation of Baudelaire in which he characterized the poet as a secret agent of his class."[20] A suggestive remark which we'll return to. For now, let's remain with Benjamin and bring into greater profile his notion that Baudelaire was an inveterate conspirator, a dandified plotter, a bohemian dabbler in the shady world of *mouchards*, and bibulous schemers.

Benjamin parallels Baudelaire and the revolutionary socialist Auguste Blanqui, observing of the latter that there are good reasons to view him as a putschist, and then offering remarks upon Blanqui's Club des Halles, a secret society where "the orthodox rites of conspiracy"[21] were observed. What especially matters, here, is that Blanqui's "features were engraved in Baudelaire's mind."[22] Pointedly, the Second Empire essay ends by reasserting the parallel between Baudelaire and Blanqui (and the next text in the *Selected Writings* volume from which I am quoting in translation is a text on Blanqui). Compare *The Arcades Project*:

> The activity of a professional conspirator such as Blanqui does not presuppose any faith in progress; it presupposes only the determination to do away with present injustice. The irreplaceable value of class hatred consists precisely in its affording the revolutionary class a healthy indifference toward speculations concerning progress … Blanqui always refused to develop plans for what comes "later."[23]

Baudelaire and Blanqui resemble professional conspirators: spur-of-the-moment characters, heedless of any lessons dialectical philosophy might teach about the proper preparation for revolution (this, we recall, was one of Marx's complaints), about the right time for revolution, and also

about the future vistas of a post-revolutionary world. Conspirators bother only with the *now* of contemporary injustice, they yoke class hatred to the impulsive removal of present-day oppressions but think nothing of what (dialectically or messianically) might thereafter be to come. In the Second Empire essay, Benjamin then cites Marx referring to those overenthusiastic "alchemists of the revolution."[24] Benjamin adds, "This almost automatically yields the image of Baudelaire: the enigmatic stuff of allegory in one, the mystery-mongering of the conspirator in the other."[25] Well now. Consider "The Swan" and the line "everything becomes allegory for me." Allegory screens its meaning behind (or as) a tissue of signs pointing elsewhere, but not necessarily to an "elsewhere" designated as literal or true meaning (I put it like this in order not to run afoul of Paul de Man), but in any case, decoding allegory requires a corresponding hermeneutic, which we might risk calling a paranoid or conspiratorial hermeneutic. For Benjamin, the mind of he who sees "allegory" all around him is perhaps tantamount to the mind of a *conspirator*—he who sees signs pointing to whatever "truth" only the in-the-know conspirator can really detect. Might we dare say that allegory is the poetic format of conspiracy?

Imagine Baudelaire lurking on street corners, or a strolling spy hidden in the crowd, on the look-out for intrigue, primed to either prevent or spark revolution, though in each case only on a whim rather than out of ideological zeal. It's a critical commonplace to highlight firstly Baudelaire's relationship to the crowd (and invoke Poe) and secondly to stress the theme of *flânerie*. But consider how Benjamin actually goes about this in the "Flâneur" section of the Second Empire essay: "In times of terror, when everyone is something of a conspirator, everybody will be in the position of having to play detective. *Flânerie* gives the individual the best prospects of doing so."[26] So, in such times, is Baudelaire a detective, a secret agent of the police, or else a conspirator? Long before Conrad and Chesterton, the paranoid question concerning double-agents and whose side you're on can be posed to Baudelaire. Benjamin adds,

> If the *flâneur* is thus turned into an unwilling detective, it does him a lot of good socially, for it legitimates his idleness. His indolence is only apparent, for behind this indolence there is the watchfulness of an observer who does not take his eyes off a miscreant.[27]

I'm not sure about "unwilling," but note in any case that serving as a spy legitimates his idleness, and "does him a lot of good socially," as if society tolerates idleness inasmuch it serves the interest of police surveillance—*flânerie* is hence redeemed and recast as the perambulations of a plainclothed cop on the beat.

Now consider Benjamin's remark concerning why Baudelaire, despite having translated Poe, never wrote his own detective story:

> Baudelaire wrote no detective story because, given the structure of his drives, it was impossible for him to identify with the detective. In him, the calculating, constructive element was on the side of the asocial and had become an integral part of cruelty. Baudelaire was too good a reader of the Marquis de Sade to be able to compete with Poe.[28]

Perhaps, given the bohemian structure of his conspiratorial drives, the truth is that Baudelaire could never have entirely adopted the position of the detective (the "goody") as opposed to the criminal (the "baddie"), since if Baudelaire sided with anybody it was with asocial types who take no side, or who take both sides at once. Poe couldn't have reimagined Dupin as a stool-pigeon, and we have to wait for Conrad and Chesterton to read experiments with the detective genre that explore the turn-coat ambiguities so enjoyed by Baudelaire. Perhaps the cruelty here is the sadistic enjoyment of holding everyone's fate in his hands: will Baudelaire turn out to be a police informant or a conspirator?

Now imagine that Baudelaire isn't a secretive representative of law and order like Chesterton's Thursday, but an alchemist of the revolution: a bomb-thrower like Conrad's Professor. But, and in order to return to Benjamin's suggestive remarks on Baudelairean allegory, let's imagine Baudelaire as an allegorist armed with word-grenades hidden in his coat pockets. As if each Baudelairean *word* skulks in taverns, loiters on street corners and in the crowd, each word is primed to go off and then elicit the Benjaminian *Chockerlebnis*. Imagine allegory and the chemistry of explosives as the volatile mixture we call Baudelaire's poetry (Baudelairean aesthetics spliced, therefore, with Conrad's philosophy of the bomb). Benjamin writes:

> The incognito was the law of his poetry. His prosody is like the map of a big city in which one can move about inconspicuously … On this map, words are given clearly designated positions, just as conspirators are given designated positions before the outbreak of a revolt. Baudelaire conspires with language itself.[29]

An amazing statement: contemplate those words given designated positions so as to mount a coordinated strike against the government. Benjamin moreover writes: "For the *coup de main* which Baudelaire calls writing poetry, he takes allegories into his confidence. They alone have been let in on the secret. … His technique is the technique of the putsch."[30] If allegory is the literary form by which it's supposed that *there are* secrets at all, and if secrets are to be discovered, then such secrets entrust themselves to allegory

and trust to Baudelaire that the explosive disclosure of such secrets will entail nothing short of a coup d'état—a putsch. Imagine Baudelaire conspiring with words themselves, fashioning words into Molotov cocktails to be thrown— one imagines—in the direction of conventional poetry. Baudelaire's bomb-blast would be a violent take-down of the poetic *status quo*.

Poetry and Paranoia

Given Benjamin's conspiratorial portrait of Baudelaire, we cannot but be struck by this, from *The Arcades Project*: "Professional conspirator and dandy meet in the concept of the modern hero. This hero represents for himself, in his own person, a *whole* secret society."[31] If Benjamin is right that the modern hero is possessed of a mind (and an unconscious) wholly structured by paranoia and conspiracies, what is accordingly at issue is the self-deluding heroism of a single mind attuned to the modernity of the Second Empire—the regime which, as Benjamin observed, is also reliant on conspiracy-mongering. Consider Baudelaire: in his one, single mind is concentrated a whole congregation of Illuminati, all voicing the paranoid, conspiratorial "truth" that Second Empire politics is a sham, a wicked lie. Yet the problem with such "professionalism," if it can indeed assist in profiling modernity and its putative heroes, is the problem identified by Marx: bohemianism, dilettantism, and the inability to decide whose side one is on—the side of the bourgeois, or that of the proletariat (or, conceivably, that of "modernity" itself). One thinks of Verloc's hesitations in *The Secret Agent*. For Baudelaire, there's no catharsis to be found in the political clarity of deciding which class one belongs to. There is psychic and political blockage, so to speak. Indeed, when Benjamin says that "Baudelaire was a secret agent—an agent of the secret discontent of his class with its own rule,"[32] we can now retrieve Sloterdijk and suggest that, besides paranoia, we have *ressentiment* as well: bourgeois discontent with bourgeois rule, a discontent cast as a secretive loathing that cannot find outlet in the adoption of a distinctively anti-bourgeois political ideology. That loathing perhaps finds expression in the casual cruelties of Baudelaire's veneration of Satan and *le Mal*. And, I suggest moreover, in the violent exploration of "equality" between Baudelaire and the pauper in "Let's Beat up the Poor!"

Consider, therefore, the following snippet, culled from Baudelaire, and noted by Benjamin in *The Arcades Project*:

> If ever your flâneur's curiosity has landed on you in a street brawl, perhaps you will have felt the same delight as I have often felt to see a protector of the public's slumbers—a policeman or a municipal guard (the real army)—thumping a republican. And if so, like me, you will have said in your heart: "Thump on, thump a little harder."[33]

Here is the Baudelairean reflex: *Assommons!* Let's thump, thump harder! It hardly matters whether this violence explores *égalité* or involves the visceral delight of seeing policemen beating up republicans. What matters is that the escalating violence titillates the blasé *flâneur*, he who is merely curious to see who gets his lumps. Perhaps that's a bit quick, though, in view of "Let's Beat up the Poor!" For, in this text, Baudelaire is apparently serious about his being "triggered" into rage at cheap solutions to political problems. Yet the possibility of titillation problematically blends political solidarity with the oppressed poor with the *jouissance* of violence (compare "The Bad Glazier").

If Baudelaire was a secret agent of his class, then it results in a mix of class superiority—condescension to the lower classes via the supposedly "aristocratic" postures of dandyism—and also a secret loathing of the middle classes which finds outlet in a violent (or sado-masochistic) siding with the poorer classes, a solidarity with the beggar that Baudelaire experiences as pain itself. From such a psychic mix results the hatred—self-directed, but outwardly projected as well—we also find in Flaubert, another expressively violent writer. Flaubert cathected on *bêtise*, but Baudelaire cathected on a different stupidity—the stupidity of deeming politics a serious business at all. The only seriousness at issue is that of physical violence. All else is pose, or else infuriating abstraction, such as that provided by tomes of socialist theory promising nothing but snake-oil solutions to poverty and oppression. For Baudelaire, the political impasse he finds himself in is resolved, as in "Let's Beat up the Poor!" by the submission to, and administration of, physical violence. Or else resolved by donning the guise of a *cynic*. The cynicism, that is, of a person—dilettante, conspirator, bohemian—who views politics as a cruel experiment in jaded irreverence: politics is a mere *bagatelle*.[34]

Speaking of cynicism, consider a portion of "The Ragpickers' Wine" (in my translation).

> One sees a ragpicker come by, shaking his head,
> Stumbling, bashing himself against the walls like a poet,
> And, heedless of the stool-pigeons (*mouchards*), his subjects,
> He pours his heart out in grandiose projects.
> He takes oaths and prescribes sublime laws,
> He lays low the wicked and raises the victims up high.

Benjamin comments:

> A ragpicker cannot, of course, be considered a member of the *bohème*. But from the littérateur to the professional conspirator, everyone who belonged to the *bohème* could recognize a bit of himself in the ragpicker.

Each person was in a more or less blunted state of revolt against society and faced a more or less precarious future.[35]

Given that "blunted state of revolt," it's no surprise that Benjamin can observe, in *The Arcades Project*, that "the reference to 'police spies' suggests that the ragman dreams of returning to combat on the barricades."[36] If he does, then the ragpicker would be well advised not to dream his political dreams out loud in case a *mouchard* is eavesdropping. But who else is listening in? Baudelaire himself? The ragpicker might resemble a poet, but perhaps a poet resembles a *mouchard*. So is Baudelaire a double-agent, capable of writing a prose-poem sympathetic to the ragpicker, but where the poem's sympathies are only feigned? Isn't this the poetry of cynicism, to invoke Sloterdijk? Baudelaire might be the *mouchard* who conveys compromising transcripts of radical political dreams to police headquarters and has the gall to call that transcript a *poem*.

Conspiracies Past and Present

I don't think Baudelaire would have minded my provocative reading of this portion of his poem. In any case, let's agree with Benjamin that Baudelaire loved the shady goings-on of conspiratorial intrigue. He loved the cynical possibilities of being a turn-coat, a secret agent, or a stool-pigeon. It's presumably why he was interested in the conspiracies of the past. Let's mention three of them. At the end of the Second Empire essay, Benjamin remarks:

On some occasions, Baudelaire tried to discern the image of the modern hero in the conspirator as well. "No more tragedies!" he wrote in *Le Salut publique* during the February days. "No more histories of ancient Rome! Aren't we today greater than Brutus?"[37]

No more tragedies: one wonders whether the rupture with classicism is marked here, with the refusal of the ennoblement of political assassination (ennobled by dint of its being called a "tragic" act, or an act worthy of classical tragedy) and, instead, the embrace of the shabby, non-tragic business of bloody conspiracy. Benjamin adds: "When Napoleon III came to power, Baudelaire did not recognize the Caesar in him. In this, Blanqui was more perceptive than he was."[38] Perhaps Blanqui tried (and failed) to be the real Brutus to Napoleon III, the new Caesar. It's not a matter of castigating Baudelaire for having failed to be a political actor. It seems, rather, as if Benjamin means that either Baudelaire couldn't discern the need for a new Brutus or couldn't decide whether he was *for* Brutus or *for* Caesar. Ponder, therefore, Benjamin's remark in *The Arcades Project* that Baudelaire

planned a "refutation of the preface to the life of Caesar by Napoleon III."[39] One wonders what that "refutation" would have looked like.

The second conspiracy is the Catiline conspiracy. Readers of the present volume will find in Paul Allen Miller's contribution much illumination on the subject and hopefully not find surprising that my own chapter—building on Benjamin's particular insight into Baudelaire—retrieves that famous example of conspiracy. In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin refers to Baudelaire's "Catilinarian existence."[40] Consider, therefore, "The Painter of Modern Life," where Baudelaire characterizes Catiline as a *dandy*. The link between conspirators like Catiline and the poses of the dandy is made by what Baudelaire considers fundamental to the dandy's disposition: the dandy is described as *oisif*—idle. In Baudelaire's imagination, Catiline's idleness is perhaps a matter of his *rich* entitlement to intervene into politics—one must be rich to be idle. Or perhaps it's that Catiline foments his conspiracy out of languid self-indulgence. In any case, if Baudelaire perhaps fancied himself as a latter-day Catiline—a Catiline for modernity—then it's all the better to profile modernity's heroes in terms of the blasé nobility of political *failure*.

The third conspiracy concerns the poet Lucan, for a time favored by Nero, but who then took part in Piso's conspiracy in 65 AD, and, on the discovery of the plot, committed suicide. Did Baudelaire identify with Lucan? Graham Robb's "Baudelaire, Lucan, and 'Une mort héroïque'" provides an answer. Robb observes that, "The choice of Lucan as a revolutionary figure also echoes his irreverent attitude to sedition."[41] Note "irreverent": would this be the bohemianism Marx feared, namely an irreverent attitude toward the seriousness of sedition and/as/or revolution? Robb continues,

> It is typical of Baudelaire's own poetic sense of politics and fondness for contradiction that when he himself was supporting revolution two years later by co-producing *Le Salut Public*, he praised the enemy of Lucan in the following terms: "L'Empereur Néron avait la louable habitude de faire ressembler dans un cirque tous les mauvais poètes et de les faire fouetter cruellement" (in my translation: "The Emperor Nero had the praiseworthy habit of having all the bad poets gathered together in a circus and having them cruelly thrashed").[42]

That "poetic sense of politics," and that "fondness for contradiction," is precisely what Benjamin explores via Baudelaire's political flip-flopping, and via the bohemian political dilettantism that motivates the quotation from Marx. Such flip-flopping extended to Baudelaire's ambivalence about Lucan, if he could praise Lucan and then praise the enemy of Lucan. We are back to cruelty and to Sade: let's beat up the poor, yes, but, à la Nero, let's beat up poets as well. Bad poets, though: perhaps only a bout of violence can thrash out the difference between good and bad poets. Is Baudelaire

that Nero—cruel, but sage in his aesthetic discernment between good and bad poets? To explore social equality, Baudelaire masochistically submits to the beggar's fists. To explore the insufferable inequality between good and bad poets, Baudelaire looks to the sadism of a whip-wielding Nero. Robb declares that "Baudelaire's name has never been linked to that of Lucan in a critical study,"[43] but actually Benjamin made that link numerous times. For instance, Benjamin remarks that Baudelaire contemplated a text entitled "Les Amours et la Mort de Lucan"[44] and offers intriguingly frequent invitations to compare Baudelaire's style to Lucan's. We can only dream, in any event, of what might have been, given Robb's observation that Baudelaire announced his intention to translate the *Pharsalia*.

Writing Conspiracy

In conclusion, let me provide an addendum to Benjamin's portrait of Baudelaire as a conspiracy theorist. For, in fact—and isn't this fascinating— Baudelaire actually wrote a short text entitled *La Conspiration*. The text was published in the French journal *Esprit* in 1951 with a commentary by Georges Blin. Consider these excerpts (in my translation):

> If the conspirators slacken off, I lose interest in my own life. I've an interest, therefore, in resuscitating the conspiracy … For, the moment the conspiracy is discovered, then youth itself returns … The moment the conspiracy is eclipsed, the taste for the void returns.[45]

So conspiracy is the very spice of life, the means to revert to the moment— youth or childhood—that is so valorized in Baudelaire. And if the taste for the void threatens, this implies the temptation to suicide: another line is "Who, therefore, will deny the right to suicide?"[46] Compare Benjamin's remark: "Modernity must stand under the sign of suicide, an act which seals a heroic will."[47] Also, referring to Baudelaire's 1846 Salon text, Benjamin observes that "suicide appears, then, as the quintessence of modernity."[48] Consider, moreover, Benjamin's observation that "Someone like Baudelaire could very well have viewed suicide as the only heroic act still available to the *multitudes maladives* of the cities in reactionary times,"[49] and that he also cites Léon Daudet: "A man needs work—that is correct. But he has other needs, too … Among his other needs is suicide."[50] We needn't multiply the quotations, but we ought nonetheless note Robb's remark that "Baudelaire, like Lucan, had contemplated suicide."[51] (A reading of Baudelaire on suicide and Marx's text on suicide I will leave for another day.)

In *La Conspiration*, what apparently wards off the *néant* is the thrill of conspiracies. To combat morbidity, to remain in that state of dandified dalliance between life and death, Baudelaire loves the stimulation of plots,

intrigues, and conspiracies. Without conspiracy, one falls into modernity's monotonous aimlessness, and one is horribly tempted by the final heroism of suicide. We know that Baudelaire sought relief from such monotonies, and it's no accident that "A Heroic Death" (discussed by Robb) depicts the heroism of Fanciullo who joins a conspiracy and is condemned to death by a prince afflicted by *ennui*. Well, the thrill of conspiracy has to be paid for eventually—the price is death. In any case, it's as if only conspiracy can ward off the existential question of suicide Albert Camus later raised in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. For Baudelaire, life has purpose as long as there is conspiracy in the world. The *existential* conspirator weighs the metaphysical balance between life that has meaning and life that has none and does such weighing on the basis of there being conspiracies or not.

Yet, if we recall Marx's anxieties concerning bohemian conspirators merely toying with political revolution, we can now wonder if Baudelaire's suicidal metaphysics *just isn't serious*, any more than his political stances are serious either, since they don't seem tethered to an ideology that extends much beyond blasé participation in mere conspiracies. That impression is confirmed by another version of Baudelaire's *La Conspiration*. Here it is in my translation:

> Discovering a conspiracy is almost like an act of creation. It's a novel and I'm in charge of the ending. I have the Empire in my hands. Options? Hesitation. Why save the Empire? Why destroy it? So, heads or tails?[52]

Here is the fate of the Second Empire in the hands of Baudelaire toying with a coin. Here is politics reduced to a *novel* authored by Baudelaire who holds the *dénouement* in his hands. Having discovered the plot, Baudelaire idly hesitates between being a *mouchard* or a proponent of regime-change, of revolution. Moreover, in a letter to Auguste Poulet-Malassis Baudelaire wrote of "the discovery of a conspiracy by an idler; one who follows it right up until the eve of the explosion, and who then plays heads or tails to decide whether he'll report it to the police or not" (my translation).[53]

Imagine Marx had read Baudelaire's texts. He might have anxiously asked of Baudelaire, as of all those professional conspirators he calls "bohemians": what is the nature of your idleness? Is it a camouflage for your professional service as a police informer or an idleness that betrays what is *idle* about your own political engagements? Are you idle like the idle Catiline, the idle dandy? You commit revolution or prevent it out of a selfish desire to inject some piquancy to your own idleness—to spice up what would otherwise be the monotony of *désoeuvrement*, of *flânerie*, and of modernity itself.

And it all comes down to the desultory gesture of a coin-toss. This is what it means to reduce the politics of revolution, or politics as such, to a

game, a gamble. Benjamin cites Baudelaire's *Fusées*: "Life has only one real charm—the charm of *gambling*. But what if we do not care whether we win or lose?"[54] Who cares? Politics is a lottery, so why not adopt the stance of the jaded gambler? Winner takes all, so elect your government, or else complain that the "system" has loaded the dice, stacked the deck, and rigged the game from the start. Or else roll your political dice again and wager on the *coup de dés* of revolution. *Status quo* or revolution? Let luck, the lottery, or the vote decide. *Les jeux sont faits. La Conspiration* puts it bluntly: "Life is a game. There are three million players. Chances. The *minute*, loser wins all (*à qui perd gagne*)."[55] It takes mere minutes for a regime to stand or fall— the minutes it takes to certify an election, or the seconds that last until the coin tossed by Baudelaire falls onto the baize and turns up heads or tails. (Incidentally, or not incidentally, one version of *à-qui-perd-gagne* concerns a way of playing chess that's called "suicide chess": winners are those who lose the pieces as quickly as possible.) Politics, then, is a win-or-lose game, a zero-sum game, where winner takes all, and hence the loser loses all (or vice versa), but in any case, and above all, it's a mere *game*.[56]

So let's register Marx's anxieties once more and explain why Benjamin makes those links between Marx's anxieties about professional conspirators and Baudelaire. For the moniker "professional" seems only to characterize the bohemian dilettantism of the jaded intriguer, the blasé bomb-thrower, the idle participant in politics now reduced to a game for those who ward off the temptations of suicide with the political stimulant of insouciant conspiracy. We can't have such persons, Marx might say, holding the fate of Empire and revolution in their hands. We need, Marx might add, to strip out those bohemian conspirators and get ideologically serious. We can't have the logic of political dialectics reduced to the incalculable contingencies of a goddess who is hardly the *Geist* of historical ineluctability, that wise Minerva venerated by dialectics, but the casual goddess of gamblers: *Fortuna*—she who decides the coin-toss. Neither for Marx nor for Hegel must dialectical accounts of history resemble the novelistic plots of conspiracy theory. Or, if they do, one wouldn't want to leave the sense of an ending in the hands of a Baudelaire—he in which, as Benjamin puts it, "professional conspirator and dandy meet."[57]

A coda to my addendum. It concerns Paul Nizan's novel *The Conspiracy* which describes dilettantish conspiracies fomented by student intellectuals, one of whom becomes a police informant. Of this text, Jean-Paul Sartre writes that Nizan portrays the "fatal lightmindedness and … aggressive futility"[58] of petty-bourgeois youths playing at revolution. "We can see," Sartre writes, "what that fine word 'conspiring' hints at in the way of whisperings, little mysteries, hollow consequence and invented dangers. Tenuous intrigues: a game."[59] But, fascinatingly, in a 1939 letter to Max Horkheimer, Benjamin reviewed *The Conspiracy*, and we shouldn't be

surprised at that, given Benjamin's interest in the game, as Sartre puts it, of conspiracy-mongering we have seen him developing in connection with Baudelaire. Benjamin cites this line from Nizard's book: "The police's secret, is that there is no history ... Little accidents and little men manufacture great events ... Everybody's unaware of chance working away behind the scenes, and of the secret of little men."[60] If we allow the police to write the *grand récit* of history at all, it will write that *récit* as a paranoid plot of Stasi surveillance into the doings of even the smallest of men: the police understand that their secrets can change a world, and so they spread spies onto the streets to listen in on the compromising dreams of ragpickers, or install *mouchards* at the prop of a bar in hopes of overhearing the unguarded confidences of drunk radicals. But would Marx agree with the police's secret truth that "there is no history"? If "everyone's unaware of chance working away behind the scenes," can dialectical speculation achieve such awareness? Is that awareness or wariness a matter of Marx's fear of the arbitrariness of those professional conspirators, his fear of those like Baudelaire who dally so fatefully with the *dénouement* of history, who toy with the die that might decide revolution to be the accidental outcome of a *coup de dés*? Dialectics cannot really countenance the contingency of the die-cast that *makes* events historically significant in the same way that a gambler's wager *makes* the event of luck or misfortune the trigger of Fate itself. To be feared, therefore, are sophomoric students and carousing bohemians, cynical chancers and spur-of-the-moment alchemists—conspiratorial dabblers who play Sartre's "game," and who hence inject the intolerably trivial happenstances of gambling and accident into what should be the serious business of history itself, history being a serried procession of events manufactured by what should be great forces, history being an account that should—fatefully, inevitably, and ineluctably—find its sense of an ending in the great event of revolution, rather than in the sense of an ending otherwise held in the hands of professional conspirators and bohemians, those who contemplate political regime-change either by blithely embracing the violently random potencies of the bomb, or else by adopting the cynic's faith in the contingency of blind and dumb luck.

Notes

1   Walter Benjamin, "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4 (1938–1940), eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Harry Zohn (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, Harvard University Press, 2003), 3.

2   Karl Marx, "*Les Conspirateurs*, par A. Chenu, ex-capitaine des gardes du citoyen Caussidière. Les sociétés secrètes; la préfecture de police sous Caussidière; les corps-francs. *La Naissance de la Republique en février 1848*, par Lucien de la Hodde," in *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels Collected Works*, vol. 10, trans. Christopher Upward (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 316.

3 Marx, "*Les Conspirateurs*," 316.
 4 Marx, "*Les Conspirateurs*," 316.
 5 Marx, "*Les Conspirateurs*," 316.
 6 Marx, "*Les Conspirateurs*," 317.
 7 Marx, "*Les Conspirateurs*," 317.
 8 Marx, "*Les Conspirateurs*," 317.
 9 Marx, "*Les Conspirateurs*," 317.
10 Marx, "*Les Conspirateurs*," 318.
11 Marx, "*Les Conspirateurs*," 314.
12 Marx, "*Les Conspirateurs*," 314.
13 Marx, "*Les Conspirateurs*," 318.
14 Marx, "*Les Conspirateurs*," 318.
15 Marx, "*Les Conspirateurs*," 312.
16 Marx, "*Les Conspirateurs*," 314.
17 Marx, "*Les Conspirateurs*," 314.
18 Benjamin, "Second Empire," 4.
19 Benjamin, "Second Empire," 4.
20 Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1987), 114.
21 Benjamin, "Second Empire," 7.
22 Benjamin, "Second Empire," 6.
23 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, Harvard University Press, 2003), 339.
24 Benjamin, "Second Empire," 7.
25 Benjamin, "Second Empire," 7.
26 Benjamin, "Second Empire," 21.
27 Benjamin, "Second Empire," 22.
28 Benjamin, "Second Empire," 23.
29 Benjamin, "Second Empire," 61.
30 Benjamin, "Second Empire," 62.
31 Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 378.
32 Benjamin, "Second Empire," 92.
33 Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 263.
34 I use the term *bagatelle* advisedly in order to draw attention to Benjamin's comment that "the spirit in which Céline wrote his *Bagatelles pour un massacre*," and its very title, go back directly to a diary entry by Baudelaire: "A fine conspiracy could be organized for the purpose of exterminating the Jewish race" (Benjamin, "Second Empire," 5).
35 Benjamin, "Second Empire," 8.
36 Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 371.
37 Benjamin, "Second Empire," 63.
38 Benjamin, "Second Empire," 63.
39 Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 313.
40 Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 375.
41 Graham Robb, "Baudelaire, Lucan, and 'Une mort héroïque,'" *Romance Notes* 30, no. 1 (Fall 1989): 70.
42 Robb, "Baudelaire, Lucan, and 'Une mort héroïque,'" 70.
43 Robb, "Baudelaire, Lucan, and 'Une mort héroïque,'" 69.
44 Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 289.
45 Georges Blin, "Sur un inédit de Baudelaire," *Esprit* 176, no. 2 (February 1951): 161–162.
46 Blin, "Sur un inédit de Baudelaire," 161.
47 Benjamin, "Second Empire," 45.

48 Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 360.
49 Benjamin, "Second Empire," 45–46.
50 Benjamin, "Second Empire," 52.
51 Robb, "Baudelaire, Lucan, and 'Une mort héroïque,'" 70.
52 Blin, "Sur un inédit de Baudelaire," 165.
53 Blin, "Sur un inédit de Baudelaire," 165.
54 Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 376.
55 Blin, "Sur un inédit de Baudelaire," 161.
56 Benjamin's interest in gambling is extensive. Readers might find modest illumination on the subject from my "The Sex Appeal of the Commodity: Gambling and Prostitution in Walter Benjamin," *Intertexts* 20, no. 2 (Fall 2016): 87–111.
57 Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 378.
58 Paul Nizan, *The Conspiracy. Foreword by Jean-Paul Sartre. Including a Previously Unpublished Letter by Walter Benjamin*, trans. Quintin Hoare (London: Verso, 2011), x.
59 Nizan, *The Conspiracy*, x.
60 Nizan, *The Conspiracy*, 234.

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PART 2

Contemporary

5

CONSPIRACY AND *RESSENTIMENT*

The Vexed Politics of the Gilets Jaunes

Zahi Zalloua

Is conspiracy thinking at odds with effective resistance, amounting to a foreclosure of emancipatory politics? As psychoanalysis teaches us, conspiracy beliefs, and the desire for order they reveal, tell us more about the believer than they do about reality. *Order*, for the conspiracy theorist, *is better than no order; orchestrated suffering is more tolerable than pain with no agent*. If conspiracy fuels *ressentiment* (which Nietzsche famously decried as the spiteful affect of the powerless), *ressentiment*, we might say, further solidifies conspiracy theorists' distortions. The Gilets Jaunes (Yellow Vests) movement in France is a case in point. Triggered by a 2018 proposal to raise fuel taxes in an effort to combat climate change, the populist movement raged against the elites profiting from ordinary people's suffering. The Gilets Jaunes brought France to a halt. While their protests have all but disappeared, the Gilets Jaunes constitute a kind of haunting symptom of economic precarity. Their grievances appeal to France's oppressed and disempowered in the age of global capitalism. Any economic dip or uncertainty (fuel shortage/price spike due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, for instance) summons the specter of the Gilets Jaunes.

Though one might expect that the group's economic discontent would make it hospitable to a leftist politics, it is the extreme right that has better succeeded in mobilizing French working-class *ressentiment*. In the first round of the 2022 French presidential election, 44% of the Gilets Jaunes voted for far-right candidate Marine Le Pen, 28% for far-left Jean-Luc Mélenchon, 8% for xenophobic pundit Éric Zemmour, and 5% for incumbent Emmanuel Macron. And with the far-right comes, of course, the exposure to conspiracy theories, none more racist than the "Great

Replacement Theory." According to this absurd conspiracy, whites—Christian Europeans—are being replaced by Muslims or immigrants in a plan orchestrated by elite Jews. This is Western racism 2.0. Culture replaces biology as *the* ontological marker of race. The conspiracy's originator, French Fascist Renaud Camus, describes the process of white replacement as "genocide by substitution."[1] The Great Replacement Theory has gained traction among the mostly white Gilets Jaunes. A recent poll indicates "that nearly half of 'yellow vest' protesters believe in a worldwide 'Zionist plot' as well as the far-right 'Great Replacement' conspiracy theory, which posits that elites are organising 'immigration deliberately to replace Europe's native populations.' "[2] We must connect this conspiracy to what Alain Badiou calls a "colonial impregnation"[3] in the French psyche, in the "collective unconscious," a readiness to scapegoat the foreigner, the Muslim, the Arab. But this conspiracy, as we all painfully know, has traveled beyond France and Europe. It no longer operates on the "fringes of the far right"[4]; it is a global phenomenon, attaining now a quasi-mainstream status.

With the necessary adjustment to context (who stands for the intruder? which Black and/or Brown immigrants?), the Great Replacement conspiracy narrative emerges in social media wherever the futurity of whiteness is at stake, whenever whites feel demographically threatened, assaulted from within and without. The indoctrinated, that is, right-wing conspiracists, don't see themselves as racists. No, they simply want to rescue their French culture, preserve the nation's ethnic purity, and ultimately save (old) Europe; they are heroic defenders of Western civilization, engaged in an existential struggle against the insidious encroachment of Islam. *Europe must remain European.* Here, conspiracy is an undeniable source of *jouissance*.

So isn't this precisely the problem of conspiracy? And isn't this problem only aggravated when *ressentiment* is thrown in the mix? More raw emotions translate into better ideological manipulation. The more that white workers from rural areas grow angry at liberal elites, or angry at "undeserving" minorities and migrant communities, the better their identification with the populist Right. But what if it were possible to de-pathologize conspiracy, to re-politicize its propensity for suspicion, via a leftist reinvention of *ressentiment*? This paper takes up this challenge of mobilizing working-class *ressentiment* for a universalist and emancipatory end. First, I critically consider the vexed politics of the Gilets Jaunes, how their conspiracy and *ressentiment* inform their so-called populist worldview. Conspiracy, in this context, is about suspicion, a distrust in the order of things, a belief in a cabal or puppet master controlling social reality. The implications for politics are significant. Conspiracy thinking locks the resentful subject or group in a reactionary mode, only capable of generating a state of impotent anger: an anger that destroys without changing the system. Countering the lure of

such reactionary conspiracy, I turn next to an exploration of the valences of *ressentiment*. I do so via a detour to Immanuel Kant's discussion of the private and public uses of reason in his 1784 essay "What Is Enlightenment?"[5] What interests me here is not a Kantian intervention at the cognitive level: reason as the philosophical remedy to excess imagination/suspicion/emotion, making the overcoming of conspiracy theory coterminous with the overcoming of self-imposed immaturity. Rather, I want to pursue the possibility of what I am calling the "public use of *ressentiment*." By giving this key Enlightenment text a Nietzschean supplement, substituting *ressentiment* for reason, I recast the Kantian formulation for the purposes of reimagining a leftist working-class politics. If the "private use of *ressentiment*" urges the privatization of grievances and thereby feeds a depoliticized politics of blame and victimhood (making it ripe for far-right conspiracy theories), the "public use of *ressentiment*" avoids reifying the proletarian subject in her rage, enjoining the Gilets Jaunes to universalize their grievances, to see their antagonism as cutting across societies, turning personal slight or suffering into a common cause.

Populist Politics

The Marxist philosopher Alain Badiou was one of the first leftist detractors of the Gilets Jaunes. He registers his skepticism about the movement famously with the poignant formulation: "Not everything that moves ahead is red [*Tout ce qui bouge n'est pas rouge*]."[6] A movement without a clear political vision always risks reinforcing the system or class structure that it is rebelling against. Though the Gilets Jaunes are waging a struggle against the bourgeoisie, they're fighting, Badiou argues, "to restore an old, outdated order" rather than "to invent a new social and political order."[7] There is no passion for an egalitarian future. They only want to maintain their relevance and power. The Gilets Jaunes lack political invention; their intervention or collective action is deemed neither "*politically* innovative nor progressive."[8] There is anger at the present, and only nostalgia for a sanitized French past, a past that once virtuously protected its white citizens from capitalism's viciousness, visited on the rest of the world, namely the Global South. Working-class *ressentiment*, in and of itself, is thus not a prelude to emancipatory change. Rather, it indexes an attachment to whiteness, a yearning to hold on to a position of structural power.

To pun on Badiou's formulation, *not all that is resentful is politically meaningful*. The Gilets Jaunes' *ressentiment* may in fact come to distort the material interests of the workers (raising questions along the lines of *What's the matter with rural France?*). Badiou points to their imbrication in the capitalist order; they are still chasing "middle-class comfort in exchange for

their consent to the dominant system."[9] Their *ressentiment* is in principle pacifiable. The system can roll back neoliberal austerity measures and offer to "increase [their] spending power while reducing [their] taxes."[10] But when the dominant system ignores or derides them (*why are you so close-minded and ignorant about climate change?*), they turn to the far-right and entertain far-fetched conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy theories satisfy the Gilets Jaunes' existential need for meaning and speak to their class anxiety by offering them a "cognitive mapping" of their ever-changing world. In this respect, these theories not only "explain" the predicament of the present by scapegoating minorities, but they also produce and impute to the Gilets Jaunes their own subjectivity, which is a kind of a "popular individualism" that weaponizes "personal anger at the new forms of servitude imposed by the dictatorship of Capital today."[11] The Great Replacement conspiracy theory exemplifies this logic. It makes available a cultural narrative that mediates the Gilets Jaunes' understanding of social reality, their position in the system. Rather than confronting society's fundamental antagonisms, the conspiracy theory fetishizes the Gilets Jaunes' suffering, generating a sense of white victimhood. It helps to stabilize the class structure, blaming a subset of actors who are stealing their enjoyment and derailing their pursuit of happiness[12] rather than the broader system of transnational oligarchy. Its proponents dream of a just capitalism, a capitalism that respects its European roots or even its French roots in its populist and isolationist mode, where Frexit is the ideal and a phantasmatic withdrawal from global capitalism (= a new world order) is the goal. In any case, the capitalism of the Gilets Jaunes corresponds to a socio-economic system free of bad/foreign/elite actors. It is a capitalism without its nefarious financial manipulators; it is, basically, the same system minus its symptoms.[13]

For many of the Gilets Jaunes, Europe/France is opening its arms to refugees while neglecting its own. Others (refugees, migrants, people of color) are undeservingly benefiting from Western goodness, while they (the working-class whites) see their purchasing power diminishing. Didier Fassin articulates what is at stake conceptually in these two types of position. He introduces a distinction between *ressentiment* and resentment. The former is the product of "historical alienation" (the result of life-long exposure to injustice, such as structural racism or apartheid, fostering not revenge, but a desire for recognition), whereas the latter refers to "ideological alienation" (the distortion of reality which transmutes the putative subject of power into an injured being, breeding vindictiveness and animosity):

> The resentful man is not directly or indirectly exposed to oppression and domination, but he expresses discontent about a state of affairs

that does not satisfy him. *Ressentiment* results from a historical alienation: something did happen, which had tragic consequences in the past and often causes continuing hardship in the present. Resentment amounts to an ideological alienation: the reality is blurred, leading to frequently misdirected rancor.[14]

Fassin importantly helps us talk about *ressentiment*/resentment in terms of social positionality, enabling us to focus on the types of "political subjectivities" attached to both concepts.[15] Whereas resentment belongs to the category of the (relatively) privileged, *ressentiment* emerges from the ranks of the dominated, the wretched of the earth. *Ressentiment* becomes more than an affect and is better understood as "an anthropological condition related to a historical situation of victim."[16] This is a decisive improvement, opening up the possibility of a *ressentiment* otherwise than slavish or reactionary; it points to a way out of the Nietzschean orbit. But Fassin's theorization of the victim simplifies too much. There is no intersectional sensitivity to the ways class might impact the positionality of whiteness.[17] Class never really factors in his analysis. If Badiou's reflections at times homogenize the Gilets Jaunes, determining them too compromised, as if lost to the far-right, Fassin's approach simply forecloses an inquiry into the Gilets Jaunes and the possibility of class struggle. There is no room for "white working-class *ressentiment*" as something other than ideological (there is only white working-class resentment).

What follows is a critical supplement to Fassin that also serves as a rejoinder to Badiou. The question is no longer "Is the Gilets Jaunes movement an instance of resentment or *ressentiment*?" but "What form of *ressentiment* is it in the process of taking?" The libidinal currency of whiteness no longer affords all of the protections that it once did. The Gilets Jaunes are not deluded by Macron's neoliberal regime; they clearly see that they're no longer benefiting from the system. The ruling class is failing to adequately manage the economic interests of the Gilets Jaunes. The condition of the precarious white worker renders problematic any rigid distinction between those who are actually dominated (the genuine victims) and those who imagine themselves to be (the phantasmatic victims). Degradation in material existence—the increased pauperization of life—creates the condition for a genuine working-class *ressentiment*. The question now is, Is there a form of *ressentiment* that is inhospitable to the far-right's weaponization of economic precarity? That is to say, Is there a manifestation of *ressentiment* that is capable of rechanneling anger toward its appropriate target or antagonism? I believe that there is, and it is found, I will argue, in the appropriation of Kant's "public use of reason."

Ressentiment and Identitarianism

In "What is Enlightenment?", Kant distinguishes between two uses of reason. In the domain of the "private use of reason," individuals acting in an official capacity have to obey orders. Yet Kant is quick to maintain that these same individuals are irreducible to their professional obedience. In performing the "private use of reason," a priest, in addressing his congregation, for example, preaches religious doxa, church doctrines, but the same priest, Kant insists, must not censure himself and give up his right to exercise his public use of reason, to speak as "*a scholar...* before the entire public of the *reading world*."[18] Slavoj Žižek has on numerous occasions adopted and adapted the public use of reason, underscoring its universal aspect and prospect. According to Žižek, "in a kind of short-circuit, by-passing the mediation of the particular," the public use of reason "directly participates in the universal."[19] This public use of reason introduces divisions in the social given; a gap emerges between the self and her social environment. The benefits of the public use of reason are significant. It allows a subject to unplug from her organic community.

To sum up: If the private use of reason seals the individual in her ethnic roots or national identity, the public use of reason unseals the individual and renders possible planetary connectivity. Žižek relates the public use of reason to Paul's utterance from Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." As with the example of Christ, the public use of reason discloses the ways in which the individual's social ego does not exhaust her being; it enables the individual to see herself from the standpoint of universality: a being/subject subtracted from and at odds with her socio-cultural milieu. If the private use of reason fosters an ethnocentric ethos, the public use of reason promotes a cosmopolitan sensibility, positioning the individual as a universal subject.

But, we may ask, how really politically emancipatory is this public use of reason? We must not forget that Kant himself underscored political obedience in his musings on the uses of reason; he stated, "*Argue*, as much as you want and about what you want, *but obey!*"[20] Žižek cautions against a quick dismissal of Kant's putative conservatism, stressing the utility and necessity of Kant's injunction "Think freely, but obey." Most recently, Žižek turned to the Kantian motto as an antidote to conspiracy theories and the rise of the anti-vaxxers. Repeating Kant, Žižek calls on "vaccine doubters" to "debate, publish [their] doubts, but obey regulations once the public authority imposes them. Without such practical consensus we will slowly drift into a society composed of tribal factions, as it is happening in many Western countries."[21] Žižek fears the destruction of each culture's "ethical substance," which creates the condition for a "new barbarism."[22]

Conspiracy theories are tearing our shared social fabric. "Tribal factions" represent the new reality, the new normal. Not surprisingly, some Gilets Jaunes expressed solidarity with the anti-vaxxers: "Equal rights, economic and social equality … the fight that is being led against the health pass is exactly the same fight as ours."[23] The far-right has capitalized on this populist dissatisfaction, casting itself as the voice of the forgotten, those left behind in the Macron regime, by the president of the rich.[24] A Gilets Jaunes refrain is "the government cares about the end of the world," but "we care about the end of the month."[25] No state authorities are to be trusted. The challenge for the left is clear; it needs to rechannel this suspicion, the Gilets Jaunes' emphatic No!, into an emancipatory end.

In this respect, the situation recalls Walter Benjamin's lucid observation that "Every rise of fascism bears witness to a failed revolution."[26] We (those of us committed to a leftist politics) must reject both the Marine Le Pen model (capitalism with a Euro-skeptic/xenophobic face) and the Macron model (capitalism with a technocratic/liberal face). They are both the left's ideological adversaries. We must also question, however, the political value of the injunction "Think freely, but obey." Is this really the only way to resist the fascistic pull of the far-right, more generally, or to counter the influence of Le Pen's *Rassemblement national* among the Gilets Jaunes, more specifically? The injunction to obey might seem appealing when applied to delusional anti-vaxxers, high on conspiracy theories, but this approach begins to falter when the subject matter is, for instance, anti-Black racism, Islamophobia, or class struggle. What is needed here is not the "trans-national public space"[27] afforded by the public use of reason. No, what is more urgently needed is a logic or principle that points out that there is something rotten in the capitalist order itself. This is what the public use of *ressentiment* does. In response to Žižek's implicit choice between "New barbarism" or Kantian measure ("think freely, but obey"), we must answer, in Žižekian fashion, *No thanks!* Why? Because the question occludes an alternative option, a different injunction. The motto for the disempowered, the racially Excluded, the wretched of the earth, is not "Think freely, but obey" but "Rage freely, *and disobey.*" To disobey registers the subject's active and ongoing divestment from the social order of things, a refusal to let *ressentiment* be coopted, neutralized, or weaponized, reduced to its private use and instrumentalized for identitarian purposes.

Everything hinges, of course, on whether or not the Gilets Jaunes belong to the category of the disempowered, the racially Excluded, the wretched of the earth. Skeptically, we may ask, Aren't the Gilets Jaunes—despite their *ressentiment*, their anger at those in power—still too invested in the system and its reproduction, unwilling to withdraw their consent to it? Isn't their consciousness irreversibly contaminated by conspiratorial fantasies? Yes, there is certainly a strong tendency among the Gilets Jaunes to lapse into

libidinal nostalgia, but there are also elements of the movement that point to another direction, to another path for *ressentiment*, one that foregrounds *ressentiment*'s generative negativity. It is tempting to see populism as the major obstacle to a more revolutionary *ressentiment*. We should however nuance if not resist this move. I agree with Badiou and question the alleged populism of Marine Le Pen (or plug in your fascist politician du jour). What ideological work does the signifier "populist" do when describing movements and their leaders? The label of "populist" stands for those who "are not wanted in the dominant system."[28] It tells us more about the labelers than the labeled. Labeling someone as "populist" reflects a deep mistrust from the labeler. Populism becomes "a hiding place for suspicious things,"[29] fodder for liberal conspiracies and counter-revolutions. In this light, Marine Le Pen, the great symbol of the populist right, requires hermeneutical scrutiny. Badiou correctly describes her as "identitarian" rather than "populist." What makes the distinction possible, I would argue, is the split between the private use of *ressentiment* and its public form. Le Pen has mastered its private use.[30] Her alarmist rhetoric fuels a perpetual state of emergency. It installs a nationalist sense of "collectivity through exclusion."[31] With the self-serving backdrop of a France in crisis—there is a struggle between Us (the true French) and Them (illegal immigrants, Muslims, global capitalists, etc.)—the private use of *ressentiment* seals the Gilets Jaunes in their pain, making their suffering constitutive of their identity.

The public use of *ressentiment* casts the Gilets Jaunes in a different light; their upheavals remind us that "democracy is not the majority choice of individuals. It is action that implements the capacity of anyone, the capacity of those who have no 'competence,' to legislate and govern."[32] They contest the legitimacy of what *is* as they open a space for democracy—for "a collective redefinition of the common good."[33] Their public form of *ressentiment* makes visible the antagonism underpinning society; it insists that "there can be no negotiation between the assembled equals and the managers of oligarchic power."[34] In this respect, the Gilets Jaunes may be candidates for what Rancière names elsewhere "la part des sans part." They belong to the system but have no proper or determinate place in it. Their presence discloses the truth—the injustice—of the system. Žižek ties the Rancièrian notion of the part of no-part to Marx's vision of the proletariat:

> To take Marx's classic example, "proletariat" stands for universal humanity not because it is the lowest, most exploited class, but because its very existence is a "living contradiction"— that is, it gives body to the fundamental imbalance and inconsistency of the capitalist social Whole.[35]

It is this potential universality of the Gilets Jaunes that Le Pen forecloses. Her nurturing of the private use of *ressentiment* anchors the Gilets Jaunes

in their white woundedness and is meant to abort their revolutionary potential: their mobilization around the recognition that when they fight for their own *égaliberté* (equality-freedom), they are fighting for everyone's.[36]

From the Great Replacement to the Becoming Black of the World

Is the difference between the private and public use of *ressentiment*, then, the absence of conspiracy theories in the latter? It is again tempting to answer in the affirmative. A *ressentiment* without ideological conspiracies would presumably fuel the Gilets Jaunes' anger in the right direction. I would, however, caution against this seemingly obvious move. The link between conspiracy and capitalism is by no means exhausted by the far-right. In my final thoughts, I want to suggest ways that the left can generate its own conspiracies that are grounded *not* in ideological collective fantasies but in the implacable logic and historical mutations of capitalism itself. Capitalism tells a certain story about its origins and effects. In the cultural imaginary of Western nations, capitalism and democracy are symbiotically interwoven. Capitalism induces a yearning for democracy, and the former thrives under the latter. But if democracy had once protected its white workers from the (worst of the) ills of capitalism, the marriage of democracy and free-market capitalism is waning under the failed regimes of austerity and the ongoing enclosure of the commons. The Gilets Jaunes' cry of resistance attests to global capitalism's insatiable hunger to instrumentalize and reify, to reduce *all* individuals to human capital. Can we describe this condition and understanding of the situation as a conspiracy? It is clearly not a Zionist conspiracy; there is no cabal at work here. This is a mutation of/in capitalism. Conspiracy here means to read economics suspiciously, politically. There is no free market; the market is never free. Conspiracy takes the form of a *J'accuse*.

A leftist conspiracy puts front and center the role of profit in global capitalism. Obscene profit (for the "haves" and "have-yachts") is the true enemy of the commons. The commons is what we as human beings share, what we esteem to be social goods unavailable for corporate privatization or state control. The market's thirst for maximum profit and accumulation is in the process of de-worlding the (Western) world; it is responsible for what Achille Mbembe describes as the "*Becoming Black of the world*"[37]—where only the über-wealthy are "protected from the planetary gangsterism of capital,"[38] immune from neoliberalism's "biopolitics of disposability."[39] Apropos James Baldwin's answer to the question of what Black folks want—"Negroes want to be treated like people"—Chinua Achebe perspicaciously observes:

> A perfectly straightforward statement containing seven words. People who have mastered Kant, Hegel, Shakespeare, Marx, Freud, and the Bible find

this statement impenetrable. How can it be that such a simple demand, couched in language even a child can have no difficulty understanding, will defeat people who have understood the most abstruse thoughts and the world's great books. Surely this extraordinary failure to comprehend has to be something more than inability. *It has to be a refusal, an act of will, a political strategy, a conspiracy.*[40]

In the neoliberal conspiracy, not only is this call to be treated as people ignored, but also more and more people are treated like Black folks. A leftist conspiracy must renew Baldwin's challenge to think the human *otherwise*, so that the Blackening of bodies—the becoming Black of the world—is thwarted.

Badiou implicitly proposes another conspiracy for the left. He adopts and adapts the Madagascan song written by Évaryste de Parny in 1783 whose first verses are "Beware of the white men": a warning to Natives about the colonizers' deceptive requests for hospitality. This conspiratorial injunction proposes a politico-hermeneutic frame that solicits and compels its recipient to hear: "beware of the system they invented and spread everywhere by force."[41] Moreover, "beware of the white men" serves as a counter-conspiracy to the Great Replacement Theory where the nationalists and fascists can only hear "beware of blacks, Arabs, Asians, and 'migrants' of all kinds."[42] The latter traffics in collective fantasies whose purpose is to scapegoat, while the former returns to the capitalist system, that is, the source of worker anxiety.

The system is arguably regressing, returning to its earlier technologies of exploitation and racialization, as in the targeting Black bodies (the making of Black bodies out of African subjects). As Mbembe writes, "the systematic risks experienced specifically by Black slaves during early capitalism have now become the norm for, or at least the lot of, all of subaltern humanity."[43] To be clear, most of the Gilets Jaunes are not currently part of this "subaltern humanity," but they are witnessing the ravaging effects of the *becoming Black of the world*, of becoming fungible units of human capital. The movement is implicitly resisting and responding to this "tendency to universalize the Black condition."[44] But, as we have seen, their resistance follows their *ressentiment*, which can go two ways. It can plead for a return to white privilege, for restoring both the welfare state and the libidinal currency of whiteness. It recalls a less greedy capitalism when *their* material interests were not so evidently discounted. This is what I've been calling *ressentiment* as nostalgia. It posits a measured or responsible capitalism that never really existed.[45] Or conversely, *ressentiment* can move them to lash out at the system itself, not its perceived bad actors (from elites to migrants, from Jews to Muslims). Here *ressentiment* as generative negativity holds the promise of reinventing material interest. It re-politicizes interests or politicizes them differently. Interests are hardly self-evident or unmediated

by external forces, neither are they simply to be "followed"; rather, interests must be constantly disentangled from their ideological layers. "They have to be redefined with regard to ideas that cannot be reduced to interests."[46] What is "good" for the mostly white working-class worker of the Gilets Jaunes is not *only* to freeze new taxes on gas, to preserve the retirement age, or to minimally expand the individual's purchasing powers, but to counterintuitively identify with society's *less-than-nothing*, "those who are turned away, deported, expelled, the clandestine, the 'undocumented'—the intruders and castoffs from humanity."[47] This is a form of *ressentiment* that opens to universality and solidarity and that sees common cause with the truly wretched of the earth. The public use of *ressentiment* does not neglect short-term concerns, which urgently speak to the Gilets Jaunes' material well-being, but supplements them with long-term goals that jar with the longevity of the system. This is not some leftist wishful thinking or fantasy. Some Gilets Jaunes members already broke with far-right "futurology"[48] when they stood with the Gilets Noirs (Black Vests), an anti-imperialist movement inspired by the Gilets Jaunes but one that took as its cause the plight of the undocumented.[49] In their statement of principles, the Gilets Noirs explain the significance of the Blackness of their vests: "Nous sommes des Gilets Jaunes noircis par la colère [*We are Yellow Vests darkened by anger*]."[50] The Black vest harnesses, magnifies, and visualizes their anger at the racist system.

In 2019, the Gilets Noirs occupied a terminal in the Paris Charles de Gaulle Airport, disrupting the operation of Air France, infamously known as "the official deporter of the French state."[51] Another target of their protest, which drew much police attention and media coverage, was their occupation of the Panthéon later that year. In occupying this cultural monument to France's national heroes, which include the likes of Voltaire and Hugo, the Gilets Noirs chanted about their right to *liberté*, *égalité*, and *fraternité*.[52] At the same time, we should not mistake the politics of the Gilets Noirs as reformist; they don't simply want to be included in the French system. When they repeat *liberté*, *égalité*, and *fraternité*, the Gilets Noirs are simultaneously engaged in the dislocation of these French ideals/universals. As Žižek puts it, dislocation is an inventive form of repetition:

> Dislocation… means that elements are thoroughly re-contextualized, integrated into a new symbolic and social space which confers on them a new meaning unrelated to the original meaning—one can in no way "deduce" this new meaning from the original one.[53]

The Gilets Noirs are calling out a Eurocentric French system that renders some unworthy of rights and protection by designating them "undocumented immigrants." The values of *liberté*, *égalité*, and *fraternité*, claimed by

the Gilets Noirs, undergo a substantial change; they are attached now to lives that were previously deemed not to matter, expulsed from humanity. So what these Gilets Jaunes did—displaying "solidarity with victims,"[54] identifying with society's subalterns, its part of no-part—could not have been forecasted by Le Pen's homogenized and homogenizing vision of the movement. Le Pen is only interested in contesting the situation in moralist terms (France first; we—white people—ought to be treated better), in safeguarding and immunizing the humanity of her white working-class constituency, halting the transformation of *la douce France* (the image of "sweet France" memorialized in the medieval epic *La chanson de Roland* [*the Song of Roland*]).[55]

Le Pen is basically preoccupied with only one question, "Who would have thought that things like these could ever happen in France?"[56] *Ressentiment* as nostalgia is her prescribed answer to this question. It dwells on lost entitlement. In courting the Gilets Jaunes, Le Pen shamelessly appeals to France's spiritual identity, to a sense of French superiority, that is under attack or in the process of disappearing. The very presence of the Gilets Noirs challenges Le Pen's paradigm of victimization and her ideological framework of what is wrong with France. Their actions are an absolute threat to her reactionary politics. Le Pen's response to the occupation of the Panthéon was predictably vicious. She tweeted her indignation:

Il est INADMISSIBLE de voir des clandestins revendicatifs occuper, en toute impunité, ce haut lieu de la République qu'est le #Panthéon.
En France, le seul avenir d'un clandestin devrait être l'expulsion, car c'est la LOI.
It is UNACCEPTABLE to see protesting illegal aliens occupy, with wholesale impunity, the eminent beacon of the Republic that is the #Pantheon.
In France, the only future for illegal immigrants should be expulsion, because it is the LAW.[57]

Marine Le Pen effortlessly folds the Gilets Noirs in the Great Replacement Theory. She underscores their shifty illegality (calling them, in French, *clandestins*, "illegal aliens," those who are hiding from the law) while urging a defense of France ("the Republic"). And this defense takes the form of a swift expulsion. Order and security—the rule of law—must prevail at all costs. Le Pen also personalizes the conspiracy theory. The Gilets Noirs must be deported, not only because they are a racial threat to *la douce France* (too many foreign contaminants, an excess of Black and Brown non-Christian bodies), but also because they contest her identitarian brand of *ressentiment*—they are threatening to replace her particularist politics with a universalist message.

For the Gilets Jaunes who sided with the Gilets Noirs, Le Pen's interpellation of the disenchanted white French worker failed to secure their loyalty or commitment to her nationalist cause. More generally, they rebuked the far-right's crude choice of French particularism over universal justice.[58] They declined the far-right's strategy of dividing the opposition to France's neoliberal system along racial and ethnic lines. The Gilets Noirs' misery is also the Gilets Jaunes' problem.[59] White and Black *ressentiments* here did not generate an identitarian solution, a myopic response to their oppression, but occasioned the unexpected making, even if momentarily, of a Gilets Jaunes-Noirs solidarity. Examples like these remind us that without leftist conspiracies, material interests will almost certainly follow the narrow path of identity politics. Unlike the Great Replacement Theory, leftist conspiracies about (the causes of) global inequality, like the becoming Black of the world, do not function to scapegoat others or fetishize the suffering of the (more recently) disempowered and forgotten. Rather, they harness the *ressentiment* and anger of the "becoming wretched"; they infuse politics with an internationalist or cosmopolitan sensibility, expanding, in turn, the meaning and appeal of interest. Leftist conspiracies shift our attention from economic vulnerability/precarity to economic antagonisms. Their hermeneutic energy lies in their endless opportunity for invention and redefinition: After the Gilets Jaunes, how will France redefine itself?

Notes

1 Renaud Camus, *Le grand remplacement* (Paris: David Reinharc, 2011). Renaud Camus briefly evokes Césaire's own formulation of "genocide by substitution" in a speech delivered at the National Assembly in 1978. Camus makes no effort to attend to the differences between his and Césaire's deployment of the saying. Whereas Césaire is concerned by lure of Antilleans to the hexagon in the 1960s and 1970s under state policies favoring emigration—and of its devastating impact on Martinican and Guadeloupean cultural identity, to say nothing of the costs to economic development on the islands—Camus is manufacturing a crisis that phantasmatically casts French Indigeneity (France's white citizens) in danger of disappearing. See Raphaël Confiant, *Aimé Césaire: Une traversée paradoxale du siècle* (Paris: Stock, 1993), 253.
2 "French 'Yellow Vests' More Prone to Conspiracy Theories: Report," *Wion*, February 11, 2019. www.wionews.com/world/french-yellow-vests-more-prone-to-conspiracy-theories-report-196756
3 Alain Badiou, "Lessons from the 'Yellow Vests' Movement," trans. Gregory Elliott, *Verso Books*, May 21, 2019. www.versobooks.com/blogs/4327-alain-badiou-lessons-of-the-yellow-vests-movement
4 Steve Rose, "A Deadly Ideology: How the 'Great Replacement Theory' Went Mainstream," *The Guardian*, June 8, 2022. www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/08/a-deadly-ideology-how-the-great-replacement-theory-went-mainstream
5 Originally published as "Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung" in the journal *Berlinische Monatsschrift*.
6 Badiou, "Lessons from the 'Yellow Vests' Movement."
7 Badiou, "Lessons from the 'Yellow Vests' Movement."

8 Badiou, "Lessons from the 'Yellow Vests' Movement."

9 Badiou, "Lessons from the 'Yellow Vests' Movement."

10 Badiou, "Lessons from the 'Yellow Vests' Movement."

11 Badiou, "Lessons from the 'Yellow Vests' Movement."

12 Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

13 Slavoj Žižek, *A Left That Dares to Speak Its Name* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), 142.

14 Didier Fassin, "On Resentment and *Ressentiment*: The Politics and Ethics of Moral Emotions," *Current Anthropology* 54, no. 3 (2013): 260.

15 Fassin, "On Resentment and *Ressentiment*," 266.

16 Fassin, "On Resentment and *Ressentiment*," 256.

17 See Jessica M. Mulligan and Emily K. Brunson, "Structures of Resentment: On Feeling—and Being—Left Behind by Health Care Reform," *Cultural Anthropology* 35, no. 2 (2020): 317–343.

18 Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?" in *What Is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, ed. James Schmidt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 60.

19 Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008), 143.

20 Kant, "An Answer to the Question," 59.

21 Slavoj Žižek, "Les Non-Dupes Errent," *The Philosophical Salon*, September 20, 2021. https://thephilosophicalsalon.com/les-non-dupes-errent/

22 Slavoj Žižek, "Beyond a Neoconservative Communism," *The Philosophical Salon*, November 15, 2021. https://thephilosophicalsalon.com/beyond-a-neoconservative-communism/

23 Amy Thorpe, "Who are the Gilets Jaunes Today?" *The Connexion*, November 23, 2021. www.connexionfrance.com/article/French-news/Who-are-the-gilets-jaunes-today-they-continue-to-demonstrate-mainly-in-Paris

24 What contributed to Gilets Jaunes' anger was not only the tax increase on gas but Macron's tax reform for the rich, which eliminated the Solidarity Tax on Wealth, or *Impôt de Solidarité sur la Fortune* (ISF), substituting it with a new tax that would only cover real estate properties and not financial capital. Kim Willsher points out that this pro-rich attitude was intrinsic to the Macron brand of economics/politics: "Lifting part of the ISF was a pillar of Macron's election campaign and one of the first fiscal measures he implemented on taking power in May 2017, leading to his nickname 'president of the rich'" (Kim Willsher, "Macron Scraps Fuel Tax Rise in Face of Gilets Jaunes Protests," *The Guardian*, December 5, 2018. www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/05/france-wealth-tax-changes-gilets-jaunes-protests-president-macron)

25 Naomi Klein, *On Fire: The Burning Case for a Green New Deal* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2019), 287.

26 Walter Benjamin, "Theories of German Fascism," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, pt. 1, 1927–1930, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, trans. Rodney Livingstone et al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 321.

27 Slavoj Žižek, "Living in the Time of Monsters," *Counterpoints* 422 (2012): 33.

28 Badiou, "Lessons from the 'Yellow Vests' Movement."

29 Alain Badiou, "Allegiance to Macron is Largely Negative!" *Verso Books*, March 30, 2019. www.versobooks.com/blogs/4287-allegiance-to-macron-is-largely-negative

30 We can productively contrast Badiou's critique of the far-right with the manifesto penned by public intellectual Bernard-Henri Lévy, novelists Milan

Kundera, Salman Rushdie, Elfriede Jelinek, Orhan Pamuk, and 25 liberal elite co-signers titled "Fight for Europe—or the Wreckers Will Destroy It." In their open letter, the authors stress the disastrous consequences of a populism that opens to national sovereignty: "In response to the nationalist and identitarian onslaught, we must rediscover the spirit of activism or accept that resentment and hatred will surround and submerge us" (Bernard-Henri Lévy et al., "Fight for Europe—or the Wreckers Will Destroy It," *The Guardian*, January 25, 2019. www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jan/25/fight-europe-wreckers-patri ots-nationalist). Whereas Badiou separates populism from identitarianism, they collapse the two. The struggle for Europe is a struggle against corrosive affects (hatred and *ressentiment*). Earlier in the manifesto, the authors lament the state of "false prophets who are drunk on resentment." But there is, in their account, only room for the "private use of *ressentiment*"—political leaders (like Marine Le Pen) and the people (like the Gilets Jaunes) are both guilty of the same bad affect. Europe, symbolized by liberal democracy and its values, is under attack, and bad actors with sad affects are the culprits. What is glaringly missing in their manifesto, however, is any reference to capitalism. It is as if Europe's problems are exclusively problems of fanatics and racists. Economic hardship, let alone any reference to antagonism between classes, never enters their discussion. They worry about "the gravediggers of the European idea," disavowing those other gravediggers, the gravediggers of capitalism, who, following *The Communist Manifesto*, suggest an alternative response to Europe's ills. The authors' nostalgia for Europe ironically echoes that of the far-right. They want a conspiracy-free Europe, a democratic Europe, a Europe, in other words, without its symptoms.

31 Todd McGowan, *Universality and Identity Politic*s (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 57.

32 Jacques Rancière, "Jacques Rancière on the Gilets Jaunes Protests," trans. David Broder, *Verso Books*, February 12, 2019. www.versobooks.com/blogs/4237-jacques-ranciere-on-the-gilets-jaunes-protests

33 Frédéric Gros, "The Politics of Disaster," *Verso Books*, May 13, 2020. www.ver sobooks.com/blogs/4705-the-politics-of-disaster-frederic-gros

34 Rancière, "Jacques Rancière on the Gilets Jaunes Protests."

35 Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Center of Political Ontology* (New York: Verso, 1999), 225.

36 Étienne Balibar, *Equaliberty: Political Essays*, trans. James Ingram (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

37 Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. Laurent Dubois (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 6.

38 Alain Badiou, *Migrants and Militants*, trans. Joseph Litvak (Cambridge: Polity, 2020), 41.

39 Henry A. Giroux, *Stormy Weather: Katrina and the Politics of Disposability* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2006).

40 Chinua Achebe, "Spelling Our Proper Name," in *Black Writers Redefine the Struggle: A Tribute to James Baldwin*, ed. Jules Chametzky (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), 6; emphasis added.

41 Badiou, *Migrants and Militants*, 41.

42 Badiou, *Migrants and Militants*, 41.

43 Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 4.

44 Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 4.

45 There is no capitalism without (the excess of) greed. As Žižek avers, "'greed' (search for profit) *is* what motivates capitalist expansion, and the wager of capitalism *is* that acting out of individual greed will contribute to the common good" (Žižek, *A Left That Dares*, 59).

46 Žižek, *A Left That Dares*, 64.

47 Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 177.

48 Žižek defines futurology as "a systematic forecasting of the future from the present trends in society. And therein resides the problem—futurology mostly extrapolates what will come from the present tendencies" (Slavoj Žižek, "We Need a Socialist Reset, Not a Corporate 'Great Reset,'" *Jacobin*, December 31, 2020. https://jacobinmag.com/2020/12/slavoj-zizek-socialism-great-reset).

49 Camille Baker, "A 'Black Vests' Movement Emerges in France to Protest Treatment of Undocumented Migrants," *The Intercept*, October 27, 2019. https://theintercept.com/2019/10/27/france-black-vests-gilets-noirs/

50 "*LE PAPIER*: Journal de lutte des Gilets noirs et de toutes et tous les immigrés," *n°0*, February, 2020. https://paris-luttes.info/IMG/pdf/journal_le_papier_-_0_.pdf

51 Luke Butterly, "The Gilets Noirs Occupy the Panthéon," *Verso Books*, July 15, 2019. www.versobooks.com/blogs/4379-the-gilets-noirs-occupy-the-pantheon

52 Baker, "A 'Black Vests' Movement Emerges."

53 Slavoj Žižek, "Sublimation and Dislocation: A False Choice," *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 16, no. 1 (2022): 2. Like Badiou, Žižek again remains skeptical of the emancipatory politics of the Gilets Jaunes. He gives them a "conditional 'yes'" (Žižek, *A Left That Dares*, 142). The movement as a whole is clearly not asking for "the whole paradigm … to change" (Žižek, *A Left That Dares* 142; Ilan Kapoor and Zahi Zalloua, *Universal Politics* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021], 135). As of yet, it is not fully global, and many of its members continue to be seduced by far-right rhetoric, but some Gilets Jaunes' openness to the plight of the Giles Noirs does point to a genuinely leftist horizon.

54 Slavoj Žižek, *Heaven in Disorder* (New York: OR Books, 2021), 50.

55 Dalya Soffer, "The Use of Collective Memory in the Populist Messaging of Marine Le Pen," *Journal of European Studies* 52, no. 1 (2022): 72.

56 Badiou, *Migrants and Militants*, 41.

57 https://twitter.com/mlp_officiel/status/1149679232156610561   See   Charlie Kimber, "Black Vests Challenge Racism of the French State," *Socialist Worker*, July 14, 2019. https://socialistworker.co.uk/international/black-vests-challenge-racism-of-the-french-state/

58 Likewise, the Gilets Noirs reciprocated, rallied behind the Gilets Jaunes, organized with them, in their protest against the exploitation of Geodis workers in Gennevilliers, an industrial suburb of Paris. See Susan Ram, "The Storming of the Panthéon!" *Counterfire*, July 21, 2019. www.counterfire.org/news/20439-the-storming-of-the-pantheon

59 Žižek, *Heaven in Disorder*, 50.

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6

UGLY FREEDOMS AND INSURRECTIONARY CONSPIRACIES

Elisabeth R. Anker

Conspiracy Theories and the Problem of Freedom

Many rioters at the US Capitol in 2021 declared they were motivated to overthrow the presidential election results because of "freedom." One participant, dressed up in Roman costume, declared in an onsite interview, "I'm here for *Freedom!*" before marching on to the Capitol.[1] Another explained that by storming the Capitol, "Freedom was fully demonstrated today!"[2] The Proud Boys militia participants collectively defined their actions and expressions of free speech.[3] That different participants shared the same motivation in freedom might seem surprising. Freedom is typically considered a political ideal that opposes tyranny and coercion. Yet these participants used freedom to describe their efforts to violently overturn an election, injure the people protecting the Capitol, and possibly hang the vice president. The rioters' declarations of freedom therefore seem to go against many foundational assumptions about freedom in American politics: we presume that freedom goes hand in hand with democracy, like when we say our politics are "free and democratic." We also insist that one person's freedom can never control or injure others; in fact, we consider that oppression, the very opposite of freedom. For most Americans, freedom brings citizens together by uniting them in a shared cause—which is exactly what the Declaration of Independence states when it creates a new political order by and for people who insist all men are endowed with liberty. These political stories about freedom are found in the values learned in history texts, the songs sung at sports events, the assertions repeated daily in news media—they are a foundational part of US political culture.

Yet while it might seem obvious to argue that the rioters' actions in no way reflect freedom, that their antidemocratic violence instead opposes freedom's ideals, they actually show something more complex. The use of freedom in this way is not wrong or an aberration. The rioters' use of freedom to justify the insurrection entails a widespread interpretation of freedom in the United States that is not expansive, but exclusionary and coercive.[4] This use of freedom isn't unprecedented—freedom has been used to oppress others and limit democracy at other moments in American history. So the problem with the rioters' claims is not that they are simply wrong about freedom— that they're incorrectly using a hallowed idea. The real problem here is what their practice of freedom entails: it thwarts democracy, monopolizes political power, and harms other people. This freedom does not combat domination, it fosters it. The insurrectionary spectacle thus disclosed an often buried and deeply disturbing problem in American politics: freedom can take shape not merely as the celebrated values of uncoerced action or rule of law, but also as subjugation and domination.

I call these kinds of freedoms "ugly freedoms," when freedom is exercised as subjugation and domination. The rioters exercise freedom as antidemocratic destruction; this is one instance of ugly freedom, but there are many others. As opposed to liberal theory's famous claim in J. S. Mill, that freedom is limited only by the harm principle—that the only legitimate justification to constrain or limit a person's freedom is when one is about to harm another—ugly freedoms show that freedom is used to justify and indeed practice harm. In my recent book *Ugly Freedoms*, I argue that ugly freedoms can be found throughout US history.[5] Popular political freedoms of autonomy and property were innovated on slave plantations and generated out of the exploitation and subjugation of Black enslavement. The freedoms of US independence, which galvanized political worldmaking based on full participation of all people in governance, included the world-destroying dispossession of indigenous nations. For much of American history freedom justified domestic violence, as up to the twentieth century husbands had the freedom of authority to beat their wives and control their finances. The problem in these cases is not simply that freedom was limited to a privileged few, but also that freedom entailed injury and oppression. In all of these situations, freedom entails harming others and enacting violence upon them. No matter how surprising the January 6 rioters' claims of freedom might be, they stem from a tradition of ugly freedoms in US politics.

The phenomenon of ugly freedoms has only grown since *Ugly Freedoms* was published, and they are increasingly taking over public discussions of freedom. Across the country, there are new laws for "Education Freedom" that outlaw discussions of racism in classrooms and punish teachers who attempt to teach about sexual diversity. Congressional legislators have created a "Freedom Caucus" that aims to strip social support from the poor

and generate deeper tax cuts for the wealthy. "Freedom Caucus" members include legislators who tried to assist Donald Trump in overturning the 2020 election. Right-wing legislators have successfully legalized discrimination of transgender people by justifying it as an expression of individual freedom. Anti-vaccination movements for "health freedom" assert that vaccinating communities or wearing masks to protect the immunocompromised and vulnerable members of our community limits their individual freedom of choice to put cloth over their mouth. Activist groups behind the law that overturned Roe v. Wade and eroded reproductive freedom call themselves "Alliance Defending Freedom." Each of these activities uses freedom to justify harm, to discriminate, or to narrow the scope of democracy. In them, freedom entails overturning democratic processes, suppressing education about race and sexuality, cutting needed services for vulnerable Americans, promoting state-forced birth, and neglecting community health. The January 6 participants' use of freedom is part of this larger trend. An increasing number of laws, caucuses, rallies, and hard-right movements use the language of freedom as a cudgel to attack democratic governance, harm marginalized Americans, and undermine civil rights.

Yet there is something additionally unsettling going on: many of these new ugly freedoms are based on conspiracy theories. The January 6 rioters, for one, draw their claims for freedom through conspiratorial fantasies that the election was stolen from Donald Trump. They imagine that this steal occurred by a variety of nefarious machinations, and that their freedom requires them to fight back and reclaim political power. Many election conspiracies about the 2020 election circulate widely in American politics: some believe that democratic voters organized with 50 million others to dupe the rest of Americans, others that corporations rigged voting machines for Biden, or that foreign governments pulled the electoral strings, and still more that a cadre of local officials across municipalities stuffed ballots to take votes away from Trump. The claim that the insurrection is an expression of freedom only makes sense when the conspiracy theory of a stolen election generates the condition of unfreedom that their insurrection fights against. Conspiracy is what enables the riot to be understood by its practitioners as an exercise of freedom. Otherwise it is just oppressive violence shorn of any other justification.

Conspiracy theories undergird ugly freedoms far beyond insurrectionary freedom. Many of the ugly freedoms proliferating today rely on conspiracy theories: book bans and "education freedom" laws rely on the conspiratorial belief that educators are indoctrinating innocent children against whiteness and heterosexuality by teaching them critical race theory and grooming them into queerness. Anti-trans legislation claims that protection for transgender kids aims to foment sexual assault of cisgender girls in bathrooms. "Health freedom" often relies on vaccine conspiracy theories that the government is

implanting microchips in people's arms, or that vaccines contain untested chemicals making people magnetic and sapping their energy. The Freedom Caucus, while grounded in a language of freedom upholding neoliberal markets insisting on the freedom of money, also draws their support from a far more popular claim that the election was stolen from rightful Republicans who need to reassert their power over the American electorate. Some practitioners of freedom through gun ownership believe that they need to hoard guns because the government plans to confiscate them at any minute. All of these conspiracy theories contend that coordinated and powerful leftist groups and governing agencies control hidden levers of power that aim to sap the strength and values of individual Americans besieged by oppressive forces limiting their agency.[6] It's a conspiracy theory that allows all of them—the rioters, anti-vaxxers, transphobes, education freedom supporters—to understand their actions as liberation. The conspiracy theory is needed, within these versions of ugly freedom, to justify their harms as enactments of freedom. Without the conspiracy of a manipulated election, or the claim that governments are implanting microchips in vaccines and grooming children for pedophilia, their ugly freedoms are merely acts of domination and harm.

Many of these new ugly freedoms coordinate around a set of conspiratorial beliefs that the government is controlled by the undeserving: Jews, abortionists, queers, people of color, immigrants, and feminists, all out to steal taxpayers' money and fund their secretly hedonistic lifestyles. These beliefs are so commonplace that to call them "conspiracies" can make them seem more marginalized than they really are. They postulate the belief that shared democratic power across race, gender, religion, and other identity categories is impossible, that any attempts to broaden access to social, economic, and political powers are *ipso facto* harmful to the core population of the American nation-state, whom they claim explicitly or implicitly are white Christians, especially men. This particular population, raised on expectations of individual sovereignty, self-making, and unbound agency, has found over the past few decades that they are unable to fulfill this vision of authoritative subjectivity in an era marked not only by democratic attempts to level traditional social hierarchies of race, gender, religion, and sexuality, but also by structural changes within neoliberalism and globalization that lead to stagnant wages, offshore jobs, unregulated corporate profitmaking, decimated labor protections, and weakened social safety nets. Rather than actively engaging the real problems of financialized capitalism, neoliberal decimations of social support, or even the violent ideology of masculinized white individualism that constructs agency mainly through domination—and thinking of other populations as allies in this process—some white men instead turn to conspiracy theories to explain their feelings of besieged subjectivity. As Timothy Melley and Peter Knight show in their foundational

analyses, conspiracy theories provide explanations for feelings of obstructed agency and confusion.[7] Conspiracies map complex forms of power through stories of potent hidden agents secretly taking control of a social body they have deliberately weakened. More comforting to imagine that "the system is 'rigged', the election is 'rigged' and the media are 'rigged'," than both to construct alternative ways of envisioning subjectivity that are not hierarchical, and to search for sharper tools to ascertain and critique interlocking unfreedoms affecting the majority of people beset by inequality, injustice, and exploitation.[8]

Frida Beckman argues that conspiracy theories now form the backbone of white male identitarian politics, what she names "a white male subject that needs to be protected from terrorizations and persecutions coming from independent women, from those of other ethnic or racial background or sexual orientations, and from immigrants" which is grounded in "the paranoid fear of losing a historically authoritative subject position."[9] This "authoritative subject position," envisioning that its normative self must be autonomous and sovereign, is almost set up to fail in this era of networked neoliberalism. It increasingly relies on conspiracies of unjust victimization when its normative vision of sovereign subjectivity—a subjectivity in which sovereignty is not only about self-mastery but also about mastery of others— cannot be reached. These conspiracy theories center on secretly powerful leftist forces out to block their individual masculinized agency and destroy the fabric of traditional American society. They provide a narrative that allows believers to "understand" the world order and in a sense to gain power just by knowing about the hidden levers of control. It explains why their individual sovereignty and control have not yet been acquired, and also how it can be gained once the hidden powers are exposed and defeated. The January 6 insurrection is exemplary in this regard, as it promises freedom for its primarily white male participants (a freedom understood as sovereign subjectivity and unbound agency) as soon as the fake election is overthrown.

January 6, Trump, and Conspiracies of American Freedom

I spend the rest of this chapter focusing on the conspiracy theories behind the Capitol insurrection, as it can tell us something more about the rising imbrication of ugly freedoms and the larger development of conspiracy theories in the last few years, and also help to interpret why conspiracy theories catalyze so many new ugly freedoms. One of the most potent conspiracy theories around the 2020 elections was that a brand of voting machine—Dominion—changed votes to Biden when they were cast for Trump or deleted votes for Trump altogether. In this conspiracy, a powerful corporation provided the cover of a "computer glitch" to rig the election

for its favored candidate—but only in swing states. The conspiracy grew to claim that the leftist government of Venezuela helped to rig this outcome (at the behest of its dead Former President Hugo Chavez). In different versions of this conspiracy, the governments of Italy, Germany, and Ukraine were also involved in the effort to manipulate votes for Biden. Another widely popular conspiracy theory claimed that mail-in ballots were a fraudulent enterprise to delete and destroy Republican votes before they could be counted. A separate conspiracy theory stated that election officials were seen throwing out bags of ballots across different municipalities. An aligned conspiracy said that poll watchers, there to neutrally observe election proceedings, were blocked from watching at key moments of particularly nefarious activity. Thousands of Democrats voted multiple times, and additional thousands of dead people voted for Biden. These conspiracies are so widespread that a 2021 AP poll found that two-thirds of Republicans now believe that Biden was not legitimately elected to the presidency.[10]

Each of the different election conspiracies around the 2020 election shared the belief that the rioter's political opposition—people who voted for Joe Biden, or local legislators upholding nonpartisan elections, or the democratic party more broadly, or Trump-critical foreign nations—had significantly more power than they actually do. The concern with their belief is not that they distrusted electoral processes, which as Knight would remind us is not out of the realm of possibility, as elections have been manipulated in the past. The concern is that they believed that the power their political opposition held was significantly larger and more capillary than actually possible and was part of a nefarious, coordinated plot to take away their own political power.[11] This belief gives meaning not merely to the disappointment of a lost election, but also to the January 6 insurrection, both for the rioters and for the millions more who supported them. Within the context of ugly freedom, the rioters and their supporters need to believe that others hold radically more power and influence than they do in order to interpret their own riotous action to overturn an election as a practice of emancipatory freedom against oppressive power. Without the conspiracy theory of overarching power, their actions are just antidemocratic violence.

The conspiracies feeding the January 6 insurrection involve claims for freedom, but their claims are not outlandish or exceptional. They are connected to common US interpretations of political freedom. Historically, Americans have been concerned that government could control and delimit individual freedom. American citizens are often highly suspicious of political authority and centralized power; this orientation to politics is part of the country's longstanding intellectual traditions.[12] This concern slides by degrees into the conspiracy of unified and dominating powers out to control ordinary Americans through the state.[13] While it is common in the literature on conspiracy to show how conspiracy theories postulate a Manichean

world of moral binaries with good and evil players, we can see here in US theories that they also create a Manichean *freedom* struggle between overpowering nefarious political forces and strong, heroic individuals who have the courage to challenge them.[14] By shifting the focus on conspiracy from a marginalized belief system to an aligned belief of the US political imaginary, we can see how a tendency to conspiratorial thinking connects to more commonplace visions of American freedom.

Yet in an interesting twist to most conspiracy theories, the insurrectionists harbor a vision of freedom that aims less to escape the state than to dominate over it, to force the levers of state power to bend to their whims and wrest control from the cabal of people who they believe have undeservedly harnessed it for their own nefarious plot. Insurrectionary freedom aims ultimately to control state power by installing the leader the rioters believe should helm it. This is different from other forms of right-leaning freedoms that aim to reject state power altogether, and other conspiracy theories that envision the state only as something to destroy or evade. Insurrectionary freedom rejects democracy, as the equal capacities of all people to share in the governance over our collective lives and make worlds together. But uniquely, insurrectionary freedom is animated by a two-pronged relationship to state power: one that entails freedom as the ability to escape the state violence of a manipulated election, and a second that entails freedom as the capacity to control the state and direct state violence over other people seen as manipulating government for their own desires, especially the people of color, immigrants, feminists, and all those undeserving of state power and thus requiring constraint from accessing it (an access that is only ever nefarious and manipulative). The insurrectionists' ugly freedom includes both escaping state power and directing its violence—most often against nonwhites, immigrants, and women.

The conspiratorial beliefs interpreting the 2020 election thus support ugly freedom as power and control over others, in which individual freedom is only found by having others below oneself who have less power and access to governing, which tracks right on to familiar US hierarchies of race, gender, sexuality, religion, and immigration status. For the insurrectionist, claiming to act in the name of a freedom that democrats attempted to deny them, controlling the election, and harming those who safeguarded it, would let them reacquire their rightful political control. This is not new: white and patriarchal ugly freedoms have been part of this country since its founding in a pro-slavery and pro-conquest freedom; Cristina Beltran describes it as

> the opportunity to be the bearer of rights and legal equality while being free to deny those same rights to racialized communities…the right to use the law to police other populations, to impose tyranny while participating in forms of violence that feel like freedom.[15]

Insurrectionists enact a modernized vision of this freedom, as the capacity to both limit the state over themselves and direct its exercise against the undeserving, and they mobilize conspiracy theories to explain why this is necessary for them. The conspiratorial base of their ugly freedoms enforces hierarchy as the primary social relation rather than commonality, equality, or mutuality.

The figure of Trump at the center of election conspiracies—and one of their biggest purveyors—demonstrates this doubled freedom in relation to state power and helps to see why so many conspiracies were catalyzed around his failed election. Trump's popularity stems from his capacity to enact this double vision of ugly freedom as both anti-state over himself and pro-state control over those he deems inferior. As president, Trump directed state violence over racialized people through police deregulation, "crackdowns" in the inner city, border violence, Muslim bans, and racist imagery and, at the same time, promised to reestablish white Americans' individual sovereignty *from* state power, from the cumbersome regulations that force people to consider the environment, racial and gender disparities, immigrant needs, or the healthcare of others. Trump's dominations both model and make possible for his supporters, at a smaller scale, a similar domination over those they believe obstruct their agency, take their things, and stop them from achieving individual sovereignty over themselves while controlling others. His spectacles of domination—whether as a boss on reality TV or as president over Twitter—demonstrate both institutionalized control over others, and exercising power without consequences.[16] Trump personally escapes the strictures of state power meant for lesser mortals—he never pays taxes, he breaks laws and regulations for housing and real estate, he routinely engages in bribery and corruption, he flouts constitutional limits of executive power, and he repeatedly assaults women without consequence.

This ugly investment in masculinized, white freedom that overpowers its opponents—which Trump more than any other political figure in recent memory encapsulates and promises—can help us to further diagnose the conspiratorial vision of ugly freedom underpinning the 2020 insurrection and the Big Lie that the election was stolen. The animating vision of ugly freedom for insurrectionists is inextricably bound up with formations of masculinity and whiteness. It is whiteness as a structure of masculinized power that cultivates feelings of superiority and then grievance if that superiority is questioned, entitlement and then resentment when that entitlement isn't fully acknowledged, desert and then umbrage when desert isn't ubiquitously upheld.[17] This is a version of freedom also inextricable from masculinity as a performance of power but not necessarily to men as such; some of its greatest performers right now include congresswomen Lauren Boebert and Marjorie Taylor Greene, who refuse to wear masks, cosplay with military guns, and verbally attack marginalized peoples as their wildly

popular performances of freedom. Their claims to this kind of freedom need conspiracies underpinning them, otherwise without the conspiracy their cosplay is revealed as empty performance. Only when the conspiracies claim unfreedom comes from government cabals unjustly leveling racial and sexual hierarchies, or from a controlling "Deep State," do their actions correlate to the freedoms they claim to enact.

It's the fundamental conspiracy theory, therefore, that allows their actions to gain significance as liberation. The conspiracy theory is required, within this version of ugly freedom, to justify claims of sexual, racial, and religious domination as enactments of freedom. Without the conspiracy of a manipulated election, ugly freedom is merely domination. Arlie Hochschild's description of white Trump supporters reveals that their relationship to democracy is already conspiratorial; she writes, summing up their worldview, "It's not your government anymore. It's theirs."[18] While this description made waves over the last few years as shorthand for Trump supporters' worldview, we can see that it is also a conspiracy. It entails a conspiracy theory that government support for social services, abortion rights, and affirmative action programs—that public resources should be de-segregated and used more equitably—means that government is controlled by minorities and women who are destroying the traditional world of white men. Democracy is experienced as a form of oppression for those to whom sharing power means they cannot practice freedom as entitled domination. Heather McGhee calls this the zero-sum game, the beliefs among whites that power is a racialized zero-sum game between whites and people of color, so that if people of color gain more rights and benefits, this directly takes away power from white people—and thus benefits and power can never be shared. Perhaps the zero-sum game is also a founding American conspiracy that is not just about power but also about freedom, the belief that white freedom is only sustained when other racialized groups have less. This is an underpinning belief of ugly freedom and is itself a commonplace way of thinking even as it partakes in conspiratorial fantasies of zero-sum power hoarding.

This is likely why Trump's supporters turn against democracy to support authoritarianism, and why the electoral defeat catalyzed their violence. Ugly freedom comes from controlling the weak and unworthy, a freedom best symbolized in modern American politics by Trump, which can explain why Trump's loss catalyzed such conspiratorial frenzy. When the ugly freedom Trump embodied was rejected by the majority of Americans in the 2020 election, the supporters who invested in him as a symbol of their own capacity to have that freedom drew from the conspiracy theory of a stolen election to do two things: (1) revive the feeling of their own sovereign power as deserved and possible and (2) justify the sense that their insurrectionary actions would equate to freedom once again. Their persecution fantasies

helped them shore up the sense that their violence and control over the electoral process would equate to freedom for themselves.

Democracy threatened Trump supporters' sense of relative superiority—what Beckman calls their "historically authoritative subject position"—because it threatened to equalize their power with the people they insisted should be below them. The threat of equality challenges their fundamental sense of freedom and its entitlements. People invested in these hierarchies of gender, nation, and race are discouraged from imagining how to differently establish their worth in nonhierarchical worlds. Indeed, Ryan Neville-Shepard shows how all of the Trumpian conspiracy theories (election conspiracy, immigrant conspiracies, Obama and Clinton conspiracies) share the attempted erosion of democratic governance and aimed to make real democratic deliberation impossible.[19] Democracy's insistence on equality, and antagonism to hierarchy, threatens Trump and his supporters with worthlessness and, therefore, must be challenged. Perhaps this is why democratic elections are interpreted by them as the ultimate conspiracy.

Conclusion

The conspiracy of a stolen election reveals the belief system of a potent version of ugly freedom that if the government does not serve white manhood, then it is fundamentally illegitimate. Conspiracy undergirds this ugly freedom and invests zero-sum beliefs in white democracy with secret manipulation. Within them, the only way for a white, heteropatriarchal, Christian population that historically controlled US government but now imagines itself to be besieged can regain freedom is to stop others from having a say in governing power. It's the conspiracy theory of a rigged election that gives voice and credence to these feelings of a government that no longer exclusively services white people and, therefore, must be taken away from power-hungry minoritized evildoers out to sap the freedom of real Americans. Trumpian politics showed us how many people in America believe implicitly or explicitly that government should only work for white people, and increasingly, that the role of government is to control the life choices of women. These beliefs share an investment in re-securing the entitlements of whiteness and masculinity as the rightful exercise of a freedom that never entails sharing power. In this vision, if government is directed to democratically serve everyone, it should be undone to work for no one. Their freedom thus requires dismantling democracy.

In order to address the Capitol Rioters appeal that they are acting in the name of freedom, it is important to upend reflexive assumptions about freedom as an unblemished ideal. Rioters' claims of besieged freedom show how freedom often entails the ugliness of domination over marginalized and racialized people, which draws on a popular and mainstream conspiracy

theory of besieged white Christian masculinity in which efforts toward democracy show that government is no longer "theirs." This freedom relies on a sense that anything blocking the overarching sovereign power of those traditionally accorded power in the United States, especially white Christian men (their vision of freedom, embodied by Trump), is unjust and depraved. The belief system of this ugly freedom comes from a long historical trend in American politics that claims government is fundamentally illegitimate if it does not solely serve the needs of "real Americans." This claim underpins many popular conspiracy theories that shape wide swaths of US politics today.

I am finishing writing this essay at my local pizza parlor and bar Comet Ping Pong in Washington, DC, a site of one of the original conspiracy theories supporting Trump's rise and electoral success in 2016. In this conspiracy, my neighborhood pizza joint was actually a front for a democratic cabal of leaders, headed by presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, who sexually assaulted young children in a secret basement lair and drank their blood to give them energy. Five years ago, a fervent believer in this conspiracy theory stormed Comet with a gun to rescue all of the imprisoned children, and when he didn't find them, he shot his gun in the restaurant while families were eating dinner. His fantasy of reclaiming freedom through personal heroic strength, of rescuing children and reclaiming an imperiled American governing system from the democratic cabal destroying American values, came to naught. Yet the Pizzagate conspiracy remains popular, and it formed the groundwork for both QAnon and for Trump's later misinformation campaigns upholding conspiracies that feed into his popularity, while terrorizing my neighborhood for years. It was a forerunner to the Big Lie of a stolen election.[20] Even as it has been thoroughly debunked, its push to discredit political opposition, to turn opponents into monstrous enemies, and to argue that American politics requires guns to purge its enemies is now bedrock to justify right-wing attempts to stop others from having a say in governing power.

If these popular conspiracy theories undergirding today's ugly freedoms show us anything, it's that freedom has, in fact, produced enormous damage and violence in American politics, and that the use of freedom to justify domination has a long history in American politics. At one level, the response is to fight for different freedoms—those truly fair and equal visions that uphold democracy and an inclusive society. This includes freedom that does not rely on others to exclude or oppose, that does not require conspiratorial fantasies about the explosive power of others, and that demands the equal flourishing of all people. Yet the response has a second level too: the powers the conspiracists aim not just to rebuff but also to arrogate for themselves may be dominating and sovereign, as intimidating as Pizzagate and the Big Lie, but we do not need to buy into opposing conspiracy theories of their unified and overarching power in order to fight them head-on.

Notes

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4 On this argument, see Elisabeth Anker, "The Exploitation of 'Freedom' in America," *New York Times*, February 6, 2022. www.nytimes.com/2022/02/04/opinion/ugly-freedom-discrimination-racism-sexism.html
5 Elisabeth Anker, *Ugly Freedoms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022).
6 See Peter Knight "Conspiracy narratives increasingly identify vast, impersonal systems (the intelligence agencies, the media, multinational corporations, technology, the globalized economy or some combination of them) as the ultimate, shadowy conspiracy controlling everything, and in the process reducing individual sovereignty." ("Conspiracy, Complicity Critique," *symplokē* 29, no. 1–2 (2021): 203.)
7 Timothy Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America* (Ithaca: Cornell, 2000); Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X-Files* (London: Routledge, 2000).
8 Frida Beckman, "Paranoid Masculinity," *symplokē* 29, no. 1–2 (2021): 244.
9 Beckman, "Paranoid Masculinity," 236, 245.
10 Hannah Fingerhut, "AP-NORC Poll: Most Republicans Doubt Biden's Legitimacy," *Associated Press AP.com*, February 5, 2021. https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-donald-trump-capitol-siege-coronavirus-pandemic-elections-79599e3eef68732134c94375a26897f7
11 Knight, "Conspiracy, Complicity, Critique."
12 Louis Hartz *The Liberal Tradition in America* (1955), Tocqueville *Democracy in America* (1835), Herbert Spencer *Political Writings* (1993), Herbert Hoover *American Individualism* (1922), and many others in this tradition.
13 Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy*.
14 J. Eric Oliver and Thomas Wood, "Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion," *American Journal of Political Science* 68, no. 4 (2014): 952–966; Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (New York: Vintage, 2008). See also Elisabeth Anker, *Orgies of Feeling: Melodrama and the Politics of Freedom* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).
15 Cristina Beltran, *Cruelty as Citizenship: How Migrant Suffering Sustains Democracy White* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 89, 104. See also Tyler Stovall, *White Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).
16 I make this argument in Richard Grusin ed., "A Tale of Two Protests," *The Long 2020*, Center for 21st Century Studies, March 19, 2021, video, www.youtube.com/watch?v=gzQk1x5M3X4&t=429s
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7

DON'T LOOK UP, BIRDS AREN'T REAL

Comedy and Conspiracy

Sophia A. McClennen

Most philosophy on the subject of conspiracy theories comes at the issue from some iteration of a binary position first articulated in 1945 by Karl Popper in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. On the one hand, "The conspiracy theorist will believe that institutions can be understood completely as the result of conscious design," Popper argues. On the other hand, he then counters,

> the social theorist should recognize that the persistence of institutions and collectives creates a problem to be solved in terms of an analysis of individual social actions and their unintended (and often unwanted) social consequences, as well as their intended ones.[1]

I propose that we think of Popper's binary as the opposition between shitheads versus shit happens. In the case of the shithead, we have deliberate, conscious manipulation of social institutions for nefarious, self-serving ends. Understood this way, the agents behind QAnon's 2020 election fraud conspiracies, which spawned the Capitol Hill Riot, for example, are shitheads. In contrast, the shit happens worldview sees social flaws, especially substantial ones, as inevitable because, for Popper, "unwanted consequences cannot be eliminated" due to the realities of human error and the complexities of human society. "To explain why they cannot be eliminated," argues Popper, "is the major task of social theory."[2] The shit happens worldview, then, might explain the tragedy of the Capitol Riots as due, in part, to the fact that no one adequately predicted the attacks, leaving the security staff at the Capitol woefully unprepared. This view has it that the tragedy of that day was inevitable, but not planned, because shit

happens, even when it is a whole lot of shit and we would very much like an explanation for how it got so out of control.

Popper's binary has served as the basis for ongoing debate about the potential merits of conspiracy theories, leading some, like Charles Pigden, to argue that Popper is mistaken to discount the shitheads of conspiracy theories or Brian Keeley to argue that we should reject conspiracy theories and "place our confidence in the 'official story' "[3]—whatever that is supposed to mean.

As compelling as it might be to debate the shithead/shit happens dichotomy, I think that debate is not especially useful or interesting, especially because it seems so obvious that shit happens by, for, about, and because of shitheads, making the dichotomy a red herring. But perhaps, most importantly, the current context of conspiracies has added additional complexities unanticipated by Popper's paradigm. As I'll explain in more detail below, Popper's formulation can't account for scenarios where the conspiracy theorist is also the conspirator, where conspiracy theorizing has become the status quo, especially in the mainstream media, and where the goals of conspiratorial conspiracy theorizing are disinformation, distrust, and a cult of conspiracy rather than uncovering the truth.

To paint the distinction, let's compare two conspiracy theories—the assertion that the 9/11/2001 attacks were an "inside job" and QAnon's 2020 election fraud claims that led to the Capitol Riots. In the first case, a surge of conspiracy theories circulated almost immediately suggesting that the Twin Towers couldn't have possibly collapsed without the aid of an insider, that the US government was involved in the attacks, and that the government was covering up the truth. Even more important, the conspiracy theories got substantial traction among the US public. A 2016 study by Chapman University showed that over half of the US population still believed that the US government was concealing information about 9/11 over 15 years after the attacks.[4] In the second case, QAnon, candidate Donald Trump himself, and a number of other elected officials propagated the conspiracy theory that the 2020 election, which Joe Biden won, was fraudulent despite having no evidence of any kind to substantiate the claim. What's more, the most watched mainstream televised news outlet, Fox News, reported the conspiracy claims endlessly to viewers.[5]

Without diving too deeply into the comparison of these two conspiracy theories, I want to underscore a few critical differences: in the second case, the conspiracy theorists are the conspirators themselves meaning that the 2020 election conspiracy is the manufactured conspiracy theory itself. That type of overlap is simply not present in 9/11 conspiracy theories. In addition, in the 2020 case, we find a complex culture of conspiracy, which thrives on disinformation, distrust, and cult-like devotion to conspiracies. In this case, the goal of conspiracy is not uncovering truth or explaining a difficult

reality, but rather creating an attachment to conspiracy. Again, the 9/11 case offers a stark difference, since, according to Karen Douglas, the dominant reason why the 9/11 conspiracy theory persists is directly tied to the "need for an explanation that's proportional to the event itself."[6]

This is all to say that, even if Popper's oppositional framework offered useful insight, which I've argued it doesn't, it is even less adequate as a theory of the current climate of conspiracy where the lines between the theorists and the conspiratorial agents have been deliberately blurred and where the quest for truth, even when it may be an illogical quest, has been replaced by a dogmatic disinformation campaign designed to cultivate an institutionalized loyalty to conspiracy. So, if Popper's original framework was shit happens versus shitheads, I'm suggesting that we also need to account for the shit spewing shitheads who use fabricated conspiracies for nothing more than their own benefit.

Thus, rather than a tired binary, what we actually need to make sense of this is attention to irony, and, as I'll argue in more detail in what follows, particular attention to the productive ways that satirical irony can reveal situational ironies. Before tracing this out, let's recall the critical difference between satirical irony and situational irony. In the first, we have an example of a deliberate effort to use creative expression in a way that signifies the opposite of what is meant. This is similar to Stephen Colbert asking a guest on his satirical pundit show, *The Colbert Report*, "George Bush, great president or greatest president?," when he meant neither. In the second, we have a reality that is out of sync with what is expected. This is akin to the least qualified candidate winning an election. In both cases, irony is tied to a juxtaposition between what things seem like on the surface and what is meant or is actually the case. The key difference, though, is that one form of irony—creative, satirical irony—is a deliberate use of playful representation meant to help reveal a strange, illogical, or unjust truth.

Thus, I'd argue that the current state of conspiracy theorizing is a perfect example of situational irony. We begin from the deeply ironic reality of contemporary conspiracy theorizing, which has none of its former potential benefits—cultivating healthy skepticism, demanding accountability, and unraveling the secrets of those in power. If the traditional conspiracy theorist is typically focused on uncovering the secret cabal, then the conspiratorial conspiracy theorist is dedicated to hiding their own conspiratorial secrets by pointing their audience away from the truth and distracting them with deliberately manufactured false conspiracies. Today the real conspiracy is the conspiracy of bad actors performing as well-meaning conspiracy theorists and that is situationally ironic. But even more ironic, when compared to traditional conspiracy theorizing, is the fact that the cult of twisted conspiracy theorizing functions as its own institution, meaning that at exactly the same time that it cultivates a distrust in public institutions (i.e.,

schools, government) it seeks to institutionalize that distrust through a trust in only itself.

I've made much of the historicizing of conspiracy theories in order to point to what I've described as a sea change, but, as I'll show when I discuss the conspiracy theories of climate change deniers as they appear in the film *Don't Look Up*, that process has been a long time in the making. The main point is that the weaponized use of conspiracy theorizing is not new, but it has become both more mainstream and more absurd.

This chapter looks at three examples of satirical irony working to reveal ironic conspiracies, each of which exposes different angles to current conspiratorial conspiracy theorizing. The first analyzes how the satirical irony of Jon Stewart on *The Daily Show* was effective at exposing the ironies of a news mediascape that depended on manufacturing conspiracies and distributing disinformation rather than informing the public. The second looks at how the satirical film *Don't Look Up* reveals not only the irony that climate scientists aren't trusted to communicate the truth about the climate, but also the even more disturbing irony that climate science conspiracy theories are trusted more in certain circles. And my third example explains how "The Birds Aren't Real" movement has used a parody conspiracy theory to expose absurdity through absurdity for an entire generation of young people who were literally raised on conspiracies. In this last case, one of the deeper ironies is how a younger generation has chosen to use parody to explain how their lives already feel like a parody. Through these three examples, I am able to show how satirical commentary, dark comedy, and situationist parody each offer different ways to reveal the ironic realities of conspiratorial conspiracy theorizing.

But before diving into my prooftexts, let me draw out what I think is the main theoretical insight I am offering regarding theory and conspiracy and that is the notion that all conspiracy theories are intrinsically ironic. They purport to expose the literal truth through recourse to speculation, fantasy, hyperbole, and paranoia. They suggest that they can account for reality because there is no account of reality. So, conspiracy theories are always, already ironic, even if they do at times morph from conspiracy theory to conspiracy report, as happened, for example, in the case of the Watergate conspiracy, when speculation of a conspiracy perpetrated by Richard Nixon became knowledge of one. But the key for me in this piece is the fact that the intrinsic irony of conspiracy theories becomes even more so when they are both conspiratorial and performative, when they conspire to use conspiracy theory as an institution and a spectacle from which they use manipulated information to derive power.

Understanding the situational irony (or ironies) of conspiracy theories, then, is critical to analyzing how one might discursively reveal them. Yet, for the most part, studies of the rhetorical uses of irony have fallen short

of coupling rhetorical irony with situational irony. Linda Hutcheon, for example, openly admits that *Irony's Edge* focuses on verbal and structural ironies, rather than situational ones.[7] Yet, Hutcheon's description of the critical edge of irony's uniquely layered communication depends on the notion that irony comes into existence precisely in response to ironic situations.[8] My argument is that if the world weren't ironic, we wouldn't need irony to describe it.

But there's more. Hutcheon writes that "irony is simultaneously disguise and communication," but conspiracy, too, is simultaneously disguise and communication (90). The difference is the intent of the disguise and communication. What makes irony so well suited to serve as a foil for deliberately, deceptive discourse is that it uses the same tools to reflect deception back on itself. When reality is presented through the destructive lens of a fun house mirror, we can only see it with an ironically ludic one. The point, returning to Hutcheon, is that for too long satirical irony has been thought of as a counter to and maybe even a distraction from serious speech, when in fact it is best considered the foil for deceptive, manipulative, hyperbolic, and/or repressive speech. When irony is defined primarily as a source of deception—as in the twisting of meaning, then we miss the fact that its goal is to use creative deception to reveal toxic deception. In what follows, I offer three examples of exactly how this process works.

Evil versus Stupid

When Jon Stewart served as host of "The Daily Show" (1999–2015), he regularly went after Fox News, the right-wing media outlet that has made a cottage industry of deceptive, sensationalist, vitriol. One of the core goals of Jon Stewart's satire was pointing out the hypocrisies of a news media system that prioritized hype over information. Holding true to the concept of the media as a fourth estate, meant to be a watchdog over government accountability as well as a source of objective truth about the system, Stewart used his satire as a fifth estate, functioning as a watchdog of the so-called watchdogs.

Thus, the central irony of news media that his satire addressed was the reality that the institution designed to inform the public was not, and, even worse, it was misinforming, distracting, and hyperbolizing instead. While much of his critique focused on Fox News, especially the irony that an openly partisan news organization chose the slogan "fair and balanced," Stewart covered the hypocrisies of other outlets as well, especially the sensationalism of the Cable News Network (CNN). But while CNN came under scrutiny for its stupid antics, like John King's "magic wall" and Wolf Blitzer's endless repetition of "breaking news," it was Fox News that offered the cult of conspiracy that Stewart would satirize. The point is that the CNN Stewart

critiqued had plenty of flaws as a news media organization, but it wasn't a hotbed of fabricated conspiracy theories as Fox News was and still is.

The notion that the media is sensationalist is not new. In fact, the relatively brief period of more objective reporting in the United States marked by news anchors like Edward R. Murrow or Walter Cronkite is best understood as an anomaly rather than the norm. Folks point to the intrepid reporting of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein on Watergate as examples of fact-based investigative journalism, but studies show that, if anything, the primary legacy of Watergate reporting was an appetite for scandal rather than facts.

That said, starting with the Reagan administration's 1987 repeal of the Fairness Doctrine as part of its push for deregulation, US news media became increasingly partisan, a shift that put news media on a path to appeal to particular political segments over and against any mission to offer the public objective news. The partisan divide, though, was exacerbated by the fact that Republicans increasingly displayed an allergy to facts, and even worse than misrepresenting the truth, they became the party of conspiracy. While many outlets and media sources played a role in developing this culture, the primary mouthpiece for this conspiracy theory society was Fox News. To put this into perspective, for example, polling during the pandemic showed that Republicans were far more likely to believe conspiracies and false claims related to the coronavirus, and it also showed that Fox News viewers both trusted their outlet to tell them the truth and had a high incidence of believing four or more Fox News circulated conspiracies about the virus.[9]

As Stewart would point out again and again on his show, Fox News played a major role in cultivating the conspiracy culture of the right, but, more importantly, it often did so in a way that hid its own role as a conspirator. To illustrate the ways that Fox News wasn't just a source of disinformation, but actually conspired to profit from manufactured conspiracies, let me walk you through one example.

In August 2010, construction was underway for what was pejoratively referred to as a "Ground Zero Mosque," but which was actually an Islamic cultural center meant to foster cultural diversity in lower Manhattan.[10] Once the plans for the building were announced, Fox News quickly jumped on the existing anti-Islamic bandwagon and suggested that the project was a conspiracy to allow Islamic extremists a chance to gloat over the destruction left behind by the 9/11 attacks. Fox News functioned as a priming agent, hyping up hysteria over the project, and fanning the flames of Islamophobia. The story up until then was classic Fox News conspiracy theorizing at the service of profit generation. But then it got worse.

As Fox News made hay over the need to follow the money trail of funding for the project, they zeroed in on Saudi-linked The Kingdom Foundation, which is led by Al-Waleed bin Talal. Then it gets weirder, because while Fox News hyperventilated over the sinister funding from bin Talal, they omitted

the fact that he is also Rupert Murdoch's partner and part owner of Fox News itself. That's right. The very same guy that Fox News was painting as the sinister donor to the Ground Zero Mosque also is a part owner of the cable news channel as well. The great irony, as Stewart points out, is that the image of bin Talal as a "bad guy" comes from Fox News, leading Fox News to hide the fact that it is also part-owned by the so-called bad guy.[11] Satirically following the logic of Fox News, Stewart then concludes that the only way to stop the funding of the "terror mosque" is to stop watching Fox News, because any revenue for the cable news channel goes "directly" to funding the mosque.[12]

What we have then is a layering of conspiracy theorizing that also incorporates various layers of irony. There is the conspiratorial conspiracy theorizing of manufacturing a conspiracy in order to profit from the theory itself, the conspiratorial presentation of delusional conspiracy theories as though they were objective truths, and the conspiratorial cover-up to hide the real ties between the mosque donor and the news channel. To reveal this chimera, Stewart uses a potent combination of satirical wit and performative incredulity. His satirical wit is seen in the moment when he points out the one thing we definitely know is that bin Talal owns part of Fox News and we "know he is a bad guy, because we just heard it on Fox News."[13] Stewart, though, balances his satirizing with a characteristically exaggerated performance of incredulity, a move that is designed to remind the viewer that we should not become numb to these types of destructive antics.

This would all be enough to show how Stewart's satirical irony works as a powerful foil for the conspiratorial conspiracy theorizing of Fox, but there is another layer to the ironic conspiracies and this ties us back to Popper. When Stewart covers the story, he also finds it curious that in their coverage of the story, Fox News fails to mention bin Talal by name. Could they have omitted it so as to help them cover up his ties to their channel? Or did they just not know he owned the foundation donating funds for the mosque? Are they shitheads or is this a case of shit happens? To illustrate the dilemma, the show has two correspondents, John Oliver and Wyatt Cenac, take opposing sides, cleverly designated as Team Stupid (shit happens) and Team Evil (shitheads). For the purposes of *The Daily Show* segment, Cenac and Oliver alternately make arguments about why you'd have to be either really stupid or really evil to omit the fact of bin Talal's name. But the real goal of this segment is to remind us that stupid versus evil is a false binary. Since, as in this case, the answer is often both. Again, Stewart artfully makes this point when he asks Oliver and Cenac if there is any chance that there is another explanation for why Fox covered the story in this manner, to which they each reply "no way." If they aren't evil, then they are really stupid. Or, if they aren't stupid, then they are really evil. Their banter drives home the point that Fox News is really, really evil and stupid. The bit not only offers more

facts about the situation than was being covered in traditional news, but it also satirically provokes the audience to rethink the logical fallacies that are often presented as the only ways to think through conspiracies. Even better, the creative irony of having two correspondents act out an absurd dichotomy reveals a series of situational ironies: satire news informs the public more than the "real" news; satire news helps cultivate critical thinking while cable news hypes fear; and satire news offers nuance while cable news doesn't. The ultimate irony is that Jon Stewart's comedy was serious about offering viewers the news while the news, itself, was a joke.

Don't Look Up

Don't Look Up (2021) is director Adam McKay's third film in what we might think of as a trilogy of dark comedies that have tackled some of the most fundamental flaws in US society. The first, *The Big Short* (2015) looked at the 2007–2008 financial crises caused by the US housing bubble. The second, *Vice* (2018) focused on the role that Vice President Dick Cheney played in starting the US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. McKay's latest, *Don't Look Up*, is focused on the complex ways that the US government, politicians, the media, celebrity culture, and clueless citizens have effectively conspired to ignore the climate crisis.

The film centers on the stories of two astronomers, Kate Dibiasky, a graduate student, and Randall Mindy, her professor from Michigan State, who discover a comet that is so large that it will destroy all of human civilization upon impact. What they describe as a "planet killer" functions as an allegory for climate change. The joke in the movie is that even when the issue is a massive comet that can be seen, even under those extreme circumstances, those in power aren't capable of saving the planet, because they put partisanship, personal gain, and profit over survival. Put simply, these people are literally too selfish and self-centered to live.

That irony is then layered in with the core irony that has historically plagued the policy response to the climate crisis—the fact that those we should trust the most are trusted the least and those that we should trust the least are trusted the most. The film goes to great lengths to show that one of our society's greatest defects is the fact that the news media, celebrities, and megalomaniacal politicians have a greater ability to communicate with the public than the experts do.

While the film doesn't really delve into one of the worst elements of climate crisis conspiracies—the idea that it is the scientists themselves who are conspirators—it certainly lays the groundwork for a look back on how climate conspiracy theorizing got so absurd. The deep irony of the climate crisis is that the greatest security risk to all humans is the subject of some of the most absolutely idiotic conspiracy theories ever. While climate

conspiracy theories don't tend to make top ten lists, there is little doubt that their traction among the public is a major obstacle to climate policy progress.[14] One 2017 study underscored the reality of the negative impact of these theories when it found that 40% of the US public rejected the consensus of 100% of scientists.[15]

For the most part, there is a real partisan divide on climate change, where Democrats believe there is a problem and Republicans think it is a hoax. But it isn't only the division between those who believe the science and those who don't that matters. There is a three-way breakdown in types of thinking on this: those who believe science (typically Democrats); those who don't trust scientists (Democrats, Republicans, and Independents); and those who think climate change is a hoax because their party elites have encouraged them to think that way (Republicans). This third category is especially critical because this last cohort of conspiracy theory believers will follow what their leaders say, meaning that their skepticism is not about whether or not they trust authority; it's just that they trust the wrong authority.

This breakdown also helps account for the partisan split on the issue. For years Republican Party elites have stoked up anxiety that climate science is hoax science. In 2003, for example, Senator James Inhofe (R-OK) stated: "With all of the hysteria, all of the fear, all of the phony science, could it be that man-made global warming is the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the American people?"[16] In 2016, a Fairleigh Dickinson poll revealed that 40% of Americans and 60% of Trump supporters thought it true or possibly true that "global warming is a myth concocted by scientists."[17]

The real catch, though, is that research suggests that the core problem in climate science beliefs is the culture of conspiracy thinking itself, i.e., the predisposition to believe conspiracies, what can be called conspiracist ideation. Joseph E. Uscinski and Santiago Olivella find that "the more a person is predisposed toward conspiracy thinking, the more likely he/she is to believe in specific conspiracy theories" and that there is a "a positive and linear relationship between conspiratorial thinking and climate denial."[18] The point is that there really are parallel universes at play here. There is one version of the planet that won't trust climate scientists and another that thinks that the idea of ignoring climate scientists is insane.

The concept that the scientific community really lives in an alternate universe is driven home in the film multiple times, with the most obvious metaphor being that the comet is actually visible, first to scientists via telescopic images and then quite plainly in the sky to anyone willing to "just look up."[19] Meanwhile the president of the United States, played by Meryl Streep as a combined caricature of Donald Trump and Marine Le Pen, is literally holding rallies telling everyone "don't look up." Hence the comet analogy is as simple as the problem of where or whether we just look.

But there's more. At one point when the scientists are being coached prior to a media appearance, they are told to "keep it simple" and not use math, to which the younger scientist incredulously responds, "but it is all math." During the film, the two main scientists repeatedly can't process why everyone refuses to listen to them and at one point their paths diverge. The older, meeker, more conciliatory Mindy acquiesces to the political and media circus, lured in part by his increasing celebrity but also as an effort to still have a voice on the issue and a seat at the table. Dibiasky, who refuses to sugar-coat her findings and often displays outrage at how stupid everyone is being, is threatened and marginalized, with even her parents refusing to allow her in their house. Later, when Mindy and Dibiasky reconnect, they see that the problem was even worse than whether or not they could get attention for the truth. The problem wasn't just that the public didn't believe their facts; it was also that the scientists were being punished, marginalized, and threatened for even trying to say it.

Near the end of the film when Mindy can no longer handle the anodyne role he has been relegated to, he has what seems like a complete meltdown on the morning talk show he regularly appears on. Mindy starts by literally saying he doesn't feel well and gets angry when the hosts try to placate him. He then urgently blurts, "Sometimes we just need to be able to say things. We need to hear things."[20] He then repeats the facts about the comet that the scientists have been saying for months. Adding that these things are totally and completely true, because they have been seen. "What other proof do we need!" he yells. "And if we can't agree that a huge comet the size of Mount Everest hurtling towards earth is not a good thing, then what the hell happened to us."[21] The scene does an excellent job of satirizing the fact that the scientist seems unhinged when in fact it is the smiling and silly media personalities who are the truly unhinged characters. As the show's anchors try to lighten the mood and suggest that the president can be trusted, Mindy gets more and more enraged as he simply speaks the truth to a talk-show crowd who has almost no plans to listen to him. The counterpoint of the outraged Mindy and the frighteningly calm anchors offers *Don't Look Up*'s audience a chance to reflect on how climate conspiracies have led many to think that Mindy's reaction is inappropriate and that the anchors make sense.

As if to underscore how absolutely absurd it is not to listen to science, the real message of the film comes embedded in a song entitled "Just Look Up," sung by the real Ariana Grande, who plays herself in the film, at a concert meant to help foster citizen engagement as the comet is perilously close to earth. In the song, she implores her listeners to "get your head out of your ass" and "listen to the goddamn qualified scientists."[22] The disturbing irony here is that it takes a pop song to speak the truth to the public, but by the time that happens it is already too late.

Beyond the mind-numbing claims that facts aren't facts and scientists don't understand science, the film jumps into a few critical spaces within which conspiracy theorizing has harmed productive engagement with the climate crisis: that peer review can't be trusted; that climate science is a partisan ploy; that climate policy is designed to weaken US power; that climate protection is bad for the economy; and that climate science is an exaggeration designed to make us live in fear. I don't have space to dig into all of these issues, but I will just dive into one example. To allude to the conspiracy claims that the scientific peer-review process is untrustworthy, for example, the film presents the character of Peter Isherwell, loosely a caricatured amalgamation of Elon Musk and Steve Jobs, who runs a tech company ironically named BASH. About midway through the film, the scientists manage to get the government to listen to them, helped in part by the fact that the president's ratings have dropped and she is convinced that action on the comet will boost her appeal. But, just as the mission is set to launch, she gets a call, comes back to the situation room, and aborts the mission. The viewer later learns that Isherwell claims that he can mine the comet and also break it apart, thereby avoiding a catastrophic impact while also offering the United States a surge in jobs and a boost to the economy. The catch, though, is that his plan has undergone no peer review of any kind—a fact that unsurprisingly leads to a total failure of the BASH mission and the destruction of the planet. The repeated references to peer review—as useless or as essential—help to underscore a critical dichotomy in how the public understands the truths of the climate.

In contrast to the "straight" talk of Stewart's ironic commentary, *Don't Look Up* uses farce. The representational beauty of farce is the way that it uses extreme situations and ironic, playful communication that becomes funny because it deliberately makes no sense. The key, though, is that the farcical situation is designed to use exaggeration to reveal a reality that is also absurd, but often, taken for granted as the status quo. The challenge in the case of climate change denial, though, is that, in taking an extreme situation and trying to turn it into an even more extreme spectacle, the gap between the exaggeration and the original is hard to place. It is hard to make a farce about a farce. The situational irony of climate change denial already plays like a farce, making the film attempt even more absurdity in its own cinematic version of a satirical farce about a farce. Add to that the dark comedy elements of the film that ask the viewer to see the joke in something that doesn't feel funny at all. Ironically, for example, the film has been subject to criticism that effectively fact checks it.[23] In one example, for instance, a critic takes issue with the metaphor of the planet killer comet, saying that using that metaphor allowed viewers to not take seriously the fact that human beings are causing climate change.[24] These outcomes, of course, are not surprising, since the fact that satire uses creative irony

rather than literal speech to communicate always leaves the potential for misinterpretation.

That said, though, the film has, in the main, been highly successful in offering an ironic, yet potent, metaphor that has helped to spark climate action. The team behind the film worked hard after its release to bundle the farce with the facts, appearing in multiple interviews, writing op-eds, and releasing companion media to the film. McKay knew that expecting the film to have a major impact was unlikely. "But if it inspires conversation, critical thinking, and makes people less tolerant of inaction from their leaders, then I'd say we accomplished our goal," he explained.[25] There is no question that it succeeded on that front, especially given the fact that it remains the most watched fiction film about climate change to date. Research shows that satire can be highly effective at starting conversations about the climate, because the humor can serve to reduce resistance to talking about something highly negative. Comedy serves as a priming agent that reduces cognitive barriers to both correcting information and processing negative information. Satirical comedy like *Don't Look Up* is also highly effective at pointing out hypocrisy, flawed logic, and the faulty thinking of climate deniers, climate inaction, and climate conspiracies. As perhaps the best sign of the film's success, it prompted a number of activists to plan "just look up" marches, with over 80,000 people protesting on one day alone in France for what they called "look up" day.[26] Such a response shows that, while some got lost on the comet metaphor, plenty of other viewers understood the irony that dealing with the climate crisis is actually pretty simple, because all we have to do is look up.

Birds Aren't Real

The "Birds Aren't Real" movement offers an entirely different approach to using satire to uncover the culture of conspiratorial conspiracy theorizing. Rather than use satirical irony to speak truth to abusive power or dark comedy to offer a farce of human folly and failures, "Birds Aren't Real" parodies conspiracy theorizing to fight the cult of conspiracy. In contrast to Jon Stewart's satirical news show or Adam McKay's film, the movement starts from the premise that we are already inside an absurd entertainment spectacle, albeit a toxic one. So, the goal isn't just to use ironic satirical commentary to expose ironic reality. Instead, the goal is to use an exaggerated satire of reality that is so absurd that it forces reflection on the absurdity of reality itself. As Zoe Williams describes it for *The Guardian*, "Birds Aren't Real" is a "conspiracy-within-a-conspiracy, a little aneurysm of reality and mockery in the bloodstream of the mad pizzagate-style theories that animate the 'alt-right'."[27]

The "Birds Aren't Real" movement was spontaneously started by Peter McIndoe in January 2017 while at a post-Trump election Women's March in Memphis. McIndoe explains that, for him, the election of Trump just felt deeply absurd and he walked around those initial days as if he were in a movie. Everything felt unstable.[28] At the rally, McIndoe observed the absurdity of the counterprotesters and their inane slogans. Without giving it much thought, his response to them was to rip a poster off a wall, turn it over, and scrawl a phrase—"Birds Aren't Real"—that seemed to him, at the time, as stupid as the slogans their signs held. "It was a spontaneous joke, but it was a reflection of the absurdity everyone was feeling," he later explained.[29] From that moment, as Trumpers came up to ask him about his sign, McIndoe improvised the backstory to his faux conspiracy. He explained that the sign referred to a greater movement that claimed that back in the 1970s the "deep state" had replaced birds with surveillance drones and then launched a cover-up. One of these exchanges was filmed and posted on Facebook. It quickly went viral, especially among young southerners like McIndoe, many of whom had grown up entirely in conspiracy culture themselves.[30]

The goal of Birds Aren't Real is to offer a conspiracy theory within a conspiracy parody that not only offers those in on the joke the chance to laugh at the absurdity of conspiracy culture, but perhaps more importantly, offers those in the movement a cathartic escape. Similar to Stephen Colbert's in character satire on "The Colbert Report," the idea of the satirical parody movement is to offer an even more extreme parody of the thing you are mocking in order to reveal the absurdity of the original. "We talk about it like an igloo. Making a shelter out of the same thing that's posing the threat. Take the materials of what is around us, build something with them, be safe in there together, and laugh."[31]

One of the challenges of the movement, though, has been the fact that in a world where conspiracy theories that posit that Hillary Clinton is running a child-trafficking ring out of a DC pizza parlor or that aborted fetuses are used to power street lamps circulate seriously, it is hard to offer a more absurd conspiracy theory than what is already out there.[32] As McIndoe puts it, the concept of truth is extremely different for his generation, raised as they were by parents who had spent decades engaged in conspiracist ideation: "Post-truth?" he quips. "The idea that we had truth is absurd."[33]

This is where "Birds Aren't Real" gets really clever, because, rather than try to out-whack job the whack jobs, they actually blend two types of conspiracy theories: they tap into 1970s-style government, deep-state conspiracy alongside the absolutely absurd concept that there are no real birds in the United States anymore. It is like having Area 51 conspiracy theorists combine with Alex Jones. In interviews, in character, McIndoe and other movement members are able to describe the massacre of all of the real

birds that the movement has been fighting to protect. They also explain that the reason we see birds on power lines is so that the robot birds can charge. But these statements are almost always accompanied by some sort of wink, a gesture to the parody. In a taped fake Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) confession interview with the man they claim started the bird genocide, the actor playing the former CIA agent explains that one of the reasons he wanted to replace birds with robots was because he was tired of cleaning bird shit off of his car.

The ease with which the members of the movement are able to blend these types of conspiracy theories is testimony to the fact that they have literally lived in a constant climate of conspiracy their whole lives. McIndoe, for example, was home schooled and grew up in a deeply conservative, Christian community in rural Arkansas. He was taught that "evolution was a massive brainwashing plan by the Democrats and Obama was the Antichrist" and read books like Carl Kerby's *Remote Control: The Power of Hollywood on Today's Culture*, which suggests that there is a conspiracy within Hollywood to peddle Darwin's theory of evolution.[34] Accompanying these absolutely batshit concepts, though, McIndoe notes that "there is legitimate harm and pain caused within these communities."[35]

In order to have fun with this absurd situation and also reveal how the nation had lost its collective capacity to distinguish fantasy from reality, the movement takes its parody seriously, only breaking character rarely. While the group often winks to the jokes, the winks are regularly missed, especially by the mainstream media. For example, in an in-character interview with *Newsweek*, McIndoe blamed technological hiccups for any online references to Birds Aren't Real being a prank. "Whenever I type in, 'Real movement, no comedy involved,' it always autocorrects it to something like 'meta-conspiracy parody-movement, showcasing post-truth-era absurdity,'" he said.[36]

The times that the movement is mistaken for a real conspiracy theory baffles those in the movement, since McIndoe insists that all anyone has to do is dig 2 inches beneath the artifice to see the joke. Others, though, get the joke, but think it is stupid, a reaction that will likely increase as the targets of the satirical parody increasingly are in on the joke. In character, satire is only funny as long as the character isn't perceived as a character by everyone. But the real benefit to this type of ironic commentary on life's ironies is the benefit to the group itself. Those in the movement and those who think it is fun have a critical cathartic experience. Microsoft and the National Broadcasting Company (MSNBC) even referred to it as a "mass coping mechanism."[37] So this is more than parody; it is closer to situationism of the sort we correlate with the surrealist avant-garde: Birds Aren't Real engages in physical stunts that help those participating in the stunts reframe the world they live in.

Returning us to Hutcheon's claim that "irony is simultaneously disguise and communication," McIndoe claims that "Comedy is the most disarming form of communication."[38] But, as I've shown, in the case of ironic engagement with conspiracy theories, the intents, purposes, and effects of disguise and communication begin from the premise that the conspiratorial conspiracy theory itself is designed to be a disarming, disguised, mode of toxic communication. Understood in this way, creatively ironic communication is not held in opposition to sincere, literal communication, but rather the opposition is best understood in terms of communication intent to deceive and communication creatively designed to use irony to reveal such deceptions. The three examples of comedic interventions into conspiracy theorizing analyzed here show us that the only way to make sense of something that doesn't make sense is by not trying to make sense.

Notes

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PART 3

Critical

8

HAS CONSPIRACY THEORY RUN OUT OF STEAM?

Clare Birchall and Peter Knight

In this chapter, we reassess the critique of critique, specifically the relationship between critique and conspiracy theory, in light of recent political, technological, and epistemic developments. We are particularly interested in the way that conspiracy theory comes to serve as a straw man in certain arguments against the hermeneutics of suspicion. Pausing on these metaphorical mobilizations of conspiracy theory, we ask what difference it makes to the discussion about critique if we take on board the manifestation, mediation, and meaning of conspiracy theories in circulation today. Before coming to contemporary conspiracy theorizing, we will examine various aspects of the debate.

Has Critique Run Out of Steam?

It is now common to claim that critique shares traits with conspiracism or paranoia.[1] In "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," Bruno Latour likens social critique to conspiracism asking, "What's the real difference between conspiracists and a popularized, that is a teachable version of social critique inspired by a too quick reading of … a sociologist…?" He finds "something troublingly similar in the structure of the explanation, in the first movement of disbelief and, then, in the wheeling of causal explanations coming out of the deep dark below."[2] For him, the debunking tendencies of critique, the way constructivism risks presenting all facts as ideological creations, not only mirrors popular denialism (about climate change and 9/11, to take his examples) but bears some responsibility for the latter. Critique for Latour, then, is both narratively structured *like* a conspiracy theory and makes conspiracy theories possible.

Critique's constructivist arguments, he writes, are being utilized within literal conspiracy theories.

> Maybe I am taking conspiracy theories too seriously, but it worries me to detect, in those mad mixtures of knee-jerk disbelief, punctilious demands for proofs, and free use of powerful explanation from the social neverland many of the weapons of social critique. Of course, conspiracy theories are an absurd deformation of our own arguments, but, like weapons smuggled through a fuzzy border to the wrong party, these are our weapons nonetheless.[3]

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's frustration with the dominance of "paranoid reading" offers a similar (earlier) sense of anxiety about the limits of critique. Whereas Latour worried that the mainstreaming of conspiracy theories takes the wind out of the sails of critique, Sedgwick suggested in effect that at the close of the twentieth century the logic of unveiling at the heart of both conspiracy theory and critique had exhausted themselves. Drawing on Paul Ricoeur's assertion that Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche exercise a "hermeneutics of suspicion" because "all three begin with suspicion concerning the illusions of consciousness, and then proceed to employ the stratagem of deciphering,"[4] Sedgwick argues that ideological critiques of texts are redundant in an era when politics and prejudice are rarely veiled. Referencing "forms of violence that are hypervisible from the start" such as the racist US carceral system or the use of mass rape as part of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, Sedgwick argues that "paranoid" reading is no longer necessary.[5] Moreover, such an approach forecloses other ways of experiencing and finding resources within texts and may have had an "unintentionally stultifying side-effect," making it more difficult to "unpack the local, contingent relations between any given piece of knowledge and its narrative/epistemological entailments for the seeker, knower, or teller."[6] In making this argument, Sedgwick begins with a reference to conspiracy theories about the origin of AIDS. The piece also works with psychoanalytic definitions of paranoia. But these are drawn on only to illustrate how critique protects itself from bad—and, therefore, also good—surprises. Where Latour concludes that there needs to be a return to modes of empiricism (if the reality of climate change is to be taken seriously), Sedgwick suggests "reparative reading" as an alternative to the endless demystifying practices of the hermeneutic of suspicion and its ideological detective work.

Has the Critique of Critique Run Out of Steam?

The arguments of Sedgwick and Latour raise the question of whether critique has only recently come to be indistinguishable from conspiracy theory and

its paranoid mode of reading, because of changes in the status of knowledge in the US and Europe. Or has there always been a close affinity between the two? Sedgwick and Latour start from the position that because political conditions have changed in our contemporary moment, critique is no longer fit for purpose. But Sedgwick was describing the situation in the late 1990s, and Latour's lament that critique has run out of steam is now nearly two decades old. Are critiques of critique themselves in danger of running out of steam, with their urgent warnings at risk of crying wolf?

In contrast to Sedgwick and Latour, other theorists working in a similar vein suggest that the uncanny similarity between critique and conspiracy theory has a much longer history than a current state of exception—even if it is only becoming apparent now. In *Conspiracies and Mysteries*, for example, Luc Boltanski suggests that the entire project of political science and sociology as they developed in the nineteenth century resemble the logic of conspiracy theory in general, and the genres of spy and detective fiction in particular.[7] According to Boltanski, the social sciences and conspiracy theory both start from the assumption that there is a more "real" reality beneath the surface confusion, and only a suspicious mode of interpretation can hope to uncover this hidden reality:

> Like detective fiction, and perhaps especially like spy fiction, sociology constantly tests the reality of reality, or, to put it another way, it challenges apparent reality and seeks to reach a reality that is more hidden, more profound and more real.[8]

This similarity "opens up more troubling perspectives,"[9] even the possibility that sociology is little better than conspiracy theory:

> The sociologist will be reproached for taking an imaginary entity—such as "the ruling class"—as his target, and for doing so out of a personal passion associated with political causes; he may even be accused of producing an equivalent—all the more pernicious for claiming to be scientific—of the conspiracy theories that nourish the resentment of "losers," the envious and the insane.[10]

In a similar vein, Boltanski's erstwhile mentor Pierre Bourdieu noted, "The fantasy of the conspiracy, the idea that an evil will is responsible for everything that happens in the social world, haunts critical social thought."[11] Following on from Sedgwick's observations, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus and Rita Felski have likewise argued that we need to move away from "paranoid" modes of reading that have always been predicated on the hermeneutics of suspicion.[12] Suspicion, as Ricoeur puts it, is "a distinctively modern style of interpretation that circumvents obvious or self-evident meanings in order

to draw out less visible and less flattering truths."[13] Best and Marcus point out that the tradition of suspicious critique thus starts from the assumption that "a text's truest meaning lies in what it does not say, describes textual surfaces as superfluous, and seeks to unmask hidden meanings."[14]

For Boltanski and Bourdieu, as well as for Best and Marcus and Felski, it seems that the affinities between critique and conspiracy theory have always already been there. Critique has always been running out of steam. As Timothy Melley has pointed out,[15] Freud's pioneering analysis of paranoia raised the possibility that the theory-making of the psychoanalyst is no less fanciful than the theory-making of the patient: "the delusions of patients appear to me to be the equivalents of the constructions which we build up in the course of analytic treatment."[16] Indeed, Karl Popper's foundational work in the late 1940s established the very idea of conspiracy theory by engaging in anxious boundary work to distinguish legitimate from bogus forms of social scientific theory, which tells us that this relationship precedes the postcritique moment. Popper accused historicism, economism, and psychologism of being irrational and pseudoscientific, of peddling "the conspiracy theory of society."[17] For Popper, only individuals have agency, and talk of collectives such as social classes or secret plotters behind the scenes pulling the levers of history is unscientific. Believing in these "magical forces" is little better than a superstitious faith in Greek gods or Providence, and they are a sign of a closed rather than an "open society." The conspiracy theory of society is thus "a typical result of the secularization of a religious superstition."[18]

Popper's text contributed to a delegitimization of the explanatory legitimacy of conspiracy theories and thus the process of demarcating between what should happen inside and outside the academy. It makes no sense, therefore, to think of Popper's text as using the term "conspiracy theory" metaphorically to describe a likeness between, say, vulgar Marxism and something independent of it called "conspiracy theory" in the vein of those postcritique interventions we consider above. The point for Popper was to identify a method of analysis, one which assumed the role of conscious intention, that needed to be eradicated from social science to make the latter more robust. We must see an endeavor like Popper's, therefore, as performatively creating rather than simply describing the divide between science and "pseudoscience." Subsequent criticisms of "science" as mirroring "pseudoscience," or institutionally endorsed ways of interpreting and knowing that display the traits of vernacular modes of interpreting and knowing, or social critique that looks like conspiracy theory, are haunted by—we could even say structured by—this performative rupture. This is evident, for example, in the way that the language in the comments we have highlighted here slides between the literal and metaphorical, as if uncertain about the object under discussion. The slippage between literal

and metaphorical uses of the term "conspiracy theory" in postcritique interventions is evident only after conspiracy theory becomes an identifiable, countercultural, vernacular discourse in the 1960s and 1970s. And, alongside other political and technological factors, it is precisely because of attempts like Popper's to eradicate conspiracy theories from the academy that they become a more distinct (sub)cultural phenomenon in the first place.

In earlier work, one of us (Clare Birchall) made the case that conspiracy theory is the necessary possibility of knowledge, interpretation, and critique. This argument is based on a deconstruction of the opposition between interpretation and overinterpretation, and between knowledge and popular knowledge.[19] In contrast to Popper's attempt to defend the boundary between rational and irrational forms of theory, Birchall argues that conspiracy theories cannot easily be separated from those interpretive modes endorsed by academia. But rather than finding in the mutually constitutive relationship between legitimate and stigmatized forms of knowledge the alarmist conclusion that critique has run out of steam, Birchall argues that all knowledge—both academic and vernacular—is shot-through with undecidability.

The legitimacy of knowledge is undecidable partly because we can never find, going back in time, a moment when legitimacy can be securely conferred. The question of authority is therefore kept radically open and endlessly deferred. This infinite regression means that knowledge can never be legitimately legitimized or authoritatively authorized. Likewise, in Peter Knight's study of postwar American conspiracy culture, he found that some works of fiction and film engage in a self-reflexive inquiry into the epistemology of paranoia, productively inhabiting the infinite regress of suspicion.[20] The endless deferral of an ultimate conspiratorial revelation in these texts—think of the ending of Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, for example—in effect performatively enacts a form of vernacular anti-foundationalism.

The point is that to function and be identifiable as knowledge, knowledge must make an arbitrary, though decisive, cut into legitimacy's chain of regression. In doing so, knowledge can never free itself from the trace of that arbitrariness. Such a trace conditions knowledge and accompanies it at every stage, even while knowledge functions perfectly well. What this means is that knowledge and non-knowledge, popular knowledge or "illegitimate" knowledge—conspiracy theory, for example—travel together: they are inseparable and co-constitutive rather than opposites in any clear sense.

Birchall argues that (legitimated) critique should not waste energy trying to distinguish itself from (illegitimate) conspiracy theory but, instead, acknowledge the undecidable nature of knowledge in order to make responsible decisions (about truth claims, politics, knowledge) without following dogma. In other words, the attempts at boundary creation and

anxiety displayed by Popper, Boltanski, Latour, and Sedgwick are somewhat futile. Conspiracy theory risks, we could say, showing up how *all* knowledge is only ever speculative theory: and that legitimacy is conferred by mystical foundations. The question to ask becomes not how can we make our knowledge, readings, or critique less conspiracist but rather what can we learn from the irreducible and essential relation between knowledge and popular knowledge, between critique and vernacular theory? And, crucially today, what do we need to make decisions about the ideas we encounter in the information ecosystem?

Critique of Conspiracy Theory

Although Popper was arguably the first to label a particular form of knowledge as a "conspiracy theory," he was not the first to worry about this style of thought. Whereas Popper's target was (in his view) the intellectual errors of his fellow social scientists, other historians, sociologists, and psychologists in the 1930s and 1940s—some of whom were associated with the Frankfurt School—had begun to investigate the connections between conspiracism, paranoia, and forms of mass political hysteria, especially in the context of the rise of fascism and totalitarianism. Yet, as Katharina Thalmann points out, Popper shifted "the focus away from individual agitators and case studies and to the inherent dangers of conspiracist schools of thought."[21] In the process, Popper set up "conspiracy theory" as a form of intellectual mistake in the abstract, with little interest in the everyday culture of conspiracism. From Popper's designation of "conspiracy theory" as a seductive but misguided form of neo-providentialism to Latour's lament that the relativizing moves of the critical theorist have been usurped by the conspiracy theorist, conspiracy theory functions as a straw man, without paying attention to how conspiracy theories actually work on the ground, including their form, content, and function. Rather than critique having run out of steam because it now resembles conspiracy theory, we instead need to engage in ideological critique of conspiracy theories—to read them symptomatically.[22] In short, we need to bring the hermeneutic of suspicion to these vernacular forms of the hermeneutic of suspicion, to listen to their longings, distortions, and silences. As the earlier work of Knight and Melley suggested,[23] some forms of postwar conspiracy culture in effect come close to creating a vernacular theory of ideology and structure, even if conspiracy theories end up disavowing those insights by ultimately cashing out the idea of structure into the default humanist language of individual agency, often marked by a paranoid anxiety about the supposed decline of white masculinity. Instead of being alarmed—paranoid, even—that critique is just like conspiracy theory, we need to keep in mind that conspiracy theory can function as a form of vernacular critique or popular sociology—even if it

ends up (in Michael Butter's terms) deflecting from and distorting the real targets.[24]

Has Conspiracy Theory Run Out of Steam?

In our earlier work, we bent over backward to read conspiracy theory as a form of vernacular critique. But has the nature of conspiracism changed since we were first working on this popular cultural phenomenon two decades ago? Recently some commentators have identified a shift from the kinds of "creative paranoia," we (and other cultural studies scholars) focused on, to forms of "post-truth" conspiracism. In the rest of this chapter, we therefore want to flip Latour's question the other way round: instead of critique running out of steam, we want to consider whether conspiracy theory—as a form of vernacular critique of secrecy and power[25]—has itself run out of steam.

At first sight, this argument is not very plausible. Far from having run out of steam, it seems that conspiracy theories are now on rocket fuel, and the problems that Latour worried about have only exacerbated. Many commentators note that the last decade has witnessed an explosion of conspiracy theories, driven in large part by social media and partisan, polarized cable news that peddles propaganda. Even if levels of conspiracy belief are in fact no higher than in previous decades[26] or more influential than in previous centuries,[27] conspiracy theories (and related forms of misinformation and disinformation) are certainly more visible. However, the increasing ubiquity of conspiracy theories can undermine part of their appeal. If they set themselves up in opposition to received wisdom (at least since the delegitimizing strategies of Popper and others), what happens when they become the norm, or, at the very least, when they are not confined to obscure underground subcultures? Conspiracy theories have become an empty and ineffectual signifier of "challenging authority" without any consensus about how political and economic structures secure privilege, power, and authority.

The internet in general and social media in particular have also accelerated the undermining of epistemic authority that Latour was concerned about. His neighbor in rural Burgundy, who had come across some 9/11 conspiracy theories online, suspected that the professor-next-door was now the naïve one. Web 2.0 has overturned traditional hierarchies of knowledge, with the gate-keeping functions of producing, editing, and publishing now democratized. And the kind of populist conspiracy theories that have come to the fore in the two decades since Latour encountered his conspiracist neighbor have self-consciously attacked the supposed elitism of academics, journalists, and politicians. Frida Beckman suggests that a post-truth fragmentation of the public sphere combined with the rise of what

Kenneth Saltman calls "essentialized identitarian forms of politics that seek to ground truth in allegedly good and bad bodies" has allowed regressive forms of conspiracism to flourish.[28] As Beckman notes, "the crisis of truth, fact, evidence, and theory must be recognized as deeply interlinked with the renaissance of white supremacist, anti-Semitic, xenophobic, sexist, authoritarian, and frequently conspiracy theory driven movement in recent years."[29]

Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum claim that the age of Trump has produced a "new conspiracism." They argue that the dominant form of conspiracy theorizing today should be thought of as "conspiracy without the theory."[30] "Classic conspiracism" (which, they explain, coexists with the new conspiracism) tries "to make sense of a disorderly and complicated world by insisting that powerful people control the course of events" by scrupulously amassing withheld facts to offer "a comprehensive narrative of events."[31] "Warranted or not," they continue, "classic conspiracism is conspiracy with a theory."[32] By contrast, the new conspiracism fails to care about proof, does not offer evidence, leaves aside close reading, and does not uncover a hidden pattern. For Muirhead and Rosenblum, the new conspiracism requires partisan affirmation and repetition over considered reflection. It eschews elaborate narratives in favor of vague gestures and innuendo. The purpose of the new conspiracism, according to Muirhead and Rosenblum, is not to convince its audience of a particular, alternative account of events, nor even to expose wrongdoing in order to (re)build a better world. Instead, the aim of this post-truth form of conspiracy theorizing is delegitimation, destabilization, and disorientation of objective journalism, scientific facts, and democratic institutions.

The affordances of social media have pushed the kind of relativizing move of conspiracy theory that Latour noticed to an instant, default claim. For example, any tragic or shocking event that happens now is immediately claimed by conspiracy theorists to be a "false flag" event that involves "crisis actors." In one light, this kind of endless churn of conspiracy speculation (both online and on cable television) is merely an intensification of existing trends, albeit with an acceleration that produces a "qualitative shift in quantity."[33] However, the kind of predictable (and predictably shocking) claims made by conspiracy entrepreneurs like Alex Jones can also be seen as emptying out the idea of conspiracy theories as—however misguidedly—unmasking the operations of power, in contrast to received wisdom. Despite his vociferous claims of patriotic commitment, the ultimate purpose of Jones's Infowars platform is to make money by selling snake-oil supplements via manufactured outrage. More broadly, social media platforms have found that rage-making content like conspiracy theories increases engagement, which in turn increases ad revenue. Moreover, in the wake of the US presidential election in 2016, it became apparent that pro-Kremlin disinformation agencies were pumping

out conspiracy theories and related forms of misinformation not to convince their target audiences of an alternative interpretation of events, but to muddy the waters and thereby pollute the information ecosystem. Although Russia and the USSR have a long history of seeding conspiracy theories as a way of undermining the West,[34] the volume of conspiracist disinformation in the age of social media has turned a trickle of alternative explanations into an overwhelming "firehose of falsehood."[35] Post-truth conspiracism thus suggests that it is conspiracy theory that has run out of steam, in the sense that there is no longer any higher purpose or critical edge to these forms of vernacular critique. They require no belief or commitment and may as well have been created by bots—indeed, in some cases, conspiracy theories are created and cascaded by bots. Such a role for automation—conspiracy theorizing without conspiracy theorists—might add weight to the idea that conspiracy theories have run out of steam, lost their sting, and become less like critique. However, such a position reinforces the idea that politics and critique can only be the result of agential (liberal humanist) subjects and side-lines models that configure the relationship between technology and humans otherwise, such as, for example, Donna Haraway's cyborg.[36]

For Latour, the appropriation of the denaturalizing language of critique by his conspiracy-mongering neighbor is alarming because—at the time, in the early 2000s—9/11 conspiracy theories were uncomfortably close to critical, left-wing attacks on the Bush administration and the war on terror. But since then, the countercultural language of critique has been appropriated wholesale—in cynical ways—by the right in their attacks on the left. As danah boyd has pointed out, alt-right conspiracy theorists have disarmed the progressive project of media literacy by adopting (in a bowdlerized version) formerly left-wing perspectives on the way popular media manufactures consent, as a way of legitimizing their dismissal of all mainstream media.[37] Likewise, Angela Nagle has shown how the alt-right has adopted the modes of edgy, transgressive critique more usually associated with the progressive social movements of the 1960s and 1970s.[38] It has also laid claim to the cyberutopian promise of the internet as a democratic tool for revolutionary good in the Arab Spring of 2011. These alt-right keyboard warriors congregated on anarchic online places such as 4Chan and claimed to have "memed" Trump into the White House just for the lulz (laughs). They take a militant stance of irony-without-satire, in which everything can be dismissed as a joke as a way of undermining the earnestness of their social justice opponents, and defending themselves from any criticism. Conspiracy theories are part of their armory, but never taken entirely seriously. Whereas conspiracy theories since Senator McCarthy's fall from grace have been stigmatized by the political and media mainstream,[39] the alt-right has willingly embraced the most stigmatized conspiracy theories, including racism, antisemitism, and Holocaust denial. Yet despite the

preference for trolling and joking, underneath the veneer of cynicism, there remains a sense of political conviction. An article on the neo-Nazi website *The Daily Stormer* summed up their approach to disguising their underlying political commitments in public as "non-ironic Nazism masquerading as ironic Nazism."[40]

The opposite is the case with Tucker Carlson when he served as a Fox News host who specialized in faux sincerity that masked a cynical exploitation of public fears for ratings. Carlson turned his show into the most watched news program in the United States by airing conspiracy views precisely because they are stigmatized. He relentlessly attacked what he characterized as elite censorship, corruption, and conspiracy. He used a direct address to "you" the viewer, against the vague "They." His claim was that an elite (including intellectuals, entertainment stars, Washington politicians, and the mainstream media) has taken over the country from its true and rightful people. As a recent *New York Times* profile summarizes,

> Night after night, hour by hour, Mr. Carlson warns his viewers that they inhabit a civilization under siege—by violent Black Lives Matter protesters in American cities, by diseased migrants from south of the border, by refugees importing alien cultures, and by tech companies and cultural elites who will silence them, or label them racist, if they complain.[41]

Carlson's underlying claim was that none of these things is a coincidence; they are all part of a bigger plot. In short, Carlson increasingly pushed the Great Replacement conspiracy theory. Carlson thus endlessly appealed to the white masculine paranoia of his viewers (who were indeed predominantly older and white), positioning them as the victimized minority of a plot by the "ruling elite."

Although there is good reason to believe that Carlson was engaged merely in bad-faith grievance-mongering, his viewers (and the Trump-supporting MAGA faithful in general) seemed to take these theories seriously—at least according to opinion polls. Much conspiracy theorizing thus remains quite traditional in its rhetoric of the "republican jeremiad,"[42] a patriotic conviction that the country can be returned to its rightful course if only the truth about the deep state cabal or the globalist elite can be exposed and removed.[43] Likewise, Muirhead and Rosenblum are not entirely correct that conspiracy theories in the post-truth moment have become mere fragments, with no underlying theory or bigger truth. If we take one example of something that might look like conspiracy without the theory—the use of conspiracist hashtags without an explanation—we can start to see a different account of the new conspiracism emerging. Hashtags "[organise] tweets into topics, publics, and communities."[44] They are a way of organizing an extraordinary number of posts to link users with shared interests. When seen in this aggregated way, we can read conspiracist tweets, however seemingly

fragmentary, to be linked to a whole range of other posts. Often such posts also contain links to other online spaces and texts—whether long-form videos on YouTube, which offer hours and hours of "classic conspiracism," or "evidence" to be analyzed from official and unofficial sources. The repeated refrain in conspiracy circles is to "Do your own research!" And users clearly spend time and energy researching the theories they are interested in. The kind of conspiracy theorizing that Muirhead and Rosenblum associate with "classic conspiracism" is happening, that is, but not in one place, in one single post. In this way, conspiracist tweets or other conspiracist fragments behave as synecdoche, gesturing toward and standing in for the whole theory. This situation speaks to the distributed, decentralized, multi-nodal nature of both the internet and conspiracy theory today.

In short, although new forms of alt-right, post-truth conspiracism suggest that conspiracy theory has run out of steam, they also betray a quite traditional concern for establishing grand explanatory narratives and narrating a patriotic hope for what they see as a better world (which often means an Aryan, white supremacist world). There is thus often a hypocritical, have-it-both-ways quality to contemporary conspiracy theories. On the one hand, they are relentlessly quick to make the relativizing move of seeing all truth claims as suspect. On the other, they nevertheless still rely on an unacknowledged, unexamined, and naïve faith in the authority of a different set of experts. All scientists are corrupt and in the pay of Big Pharma (the logic goes), other than *this* lone, brave, renegade scientist-cum-whistle-blower. Everything you are told is a lie … except *this* conspiracy theory. As Sebastian Schindler argues, conspiracy theories mimic critique's challenge to received wisdom, but they fail to also examine the unspoken ideological assumptions of that move:

> the task of critique is to problematise two defects: uncritical belief in truth claims, on the one hand, and the uncritical relativisation of all truth claims, on the other. Both extremes, naïve belief and cynical disbelief, are forms of ideology.[45]

There is a lack of critical awareness of the epistemological status of their own critique, and, as Schindler points out, "the contradictory combination of these two extremes—radical criticism of naïveté and radically naïve belief—is a core element of totalitarian ideology."[46] In short, conspiracy theorists fail to be suspicious about their own habits of suspicion and gullibility.[47]

Conspiracy Theories of Critique

Increasingly, it is not only the tools of critique that conspiracy theorists, or our "enemies" (as Latour calls them), have commandeered but the critique

of (conspiracist) critique. The populist right have taken Latour's line, and are happy to dismiss poststructuralism (and particularly representatives like Derrida and Foucault) as the Trojan horse of relativism, part of a wider culture wars attack on tenured radicals. (Ironically, they do this despite the fact that Trump's administration was adept at "folk postmodernism" with press secretary Kellyanne Conway and her "alternative facts," and advisor Steve Bannon and his talk of the "deconstruction of the administrative state.")[48] Attacks on so-called Cultural Marxism and Critical Race Theory are now ubiquitous. It is not merely that conspiracy theories are *like* critique (as Latour feared), but there are now conspiracy theories *of* critique. New attacks on theory are thus a part of the culture wars. In one controversial memo, since-fired US National Security Council official, Rich Higgins, pointed to followers of "Gramsci[an] Marxism, Fabian Socialism and … the Frankfurt School" for orchestrating political opposition to Trump.[49] Higgins claimed that "the Frankfurt strategy deconstructs societies through attacks on culture." Trump himself denounced "critical race theory" saying that it is "being deployed to rip apart friends, neighbors, and families" and calling it "a form of child abuse."[50] Even in France, the home of continental theory, a previous French minister for Higher Education attacked critical theory for being "Islamo-Gauchism."[51] The construction of a conspiracy theory (leftist academics are conspiring to undermine the United States, France, and/or capitalism) that fashions scholarly theories (about the reproduction of inequality under racial capitalism) as themselves nothing more than flimsy conspiracy theories is exemplary of the destabilizing dynamic in operation. It becomes difficult for journalists and academics to politicize attempts to undermine expertise, for when they do "expose" post-truth tactics, the ground from which they speak has already been undermined by those tactics. Journalists are part of the "fake news" and academics are merely peddling "cultural Marxism," the logic goes.

What we see being exploited here, in fact, is the very slippage between the literal and the metaphorical use of "conspiracy theory" that we have identified in the critiques of critique. In the eyes of right-wing rhetoricians, "Islamo-Gauchist" critical theory, critical race theory, and cultural Marxism are not merely like conspiracism, they are the only conspiracy theories in circulation. Such accusations even move beyond the supposed paranoid nature of critique to position critique itself as a conspiracy—against Trump, against "friends, neighbors, families," against white, Christian communities. It is not only constructivism that has been hijacked here, as Latour claims, but his own critique of conspiracist critique. Right-wing appropriations simply exaggerate Latour's position. Whereas for Latour, critique had unwittingly opened the post-truth door to our regressive "enemies," those enemies now say that critical theorists are consciously conspiring against them and the factions of society they represent.

Rather than setting up conspiracy theory as merely an intellectual mistake that helps bolster the claim of critique to legitimacy, or worrying that the latter has become dangerously indistinguishable from the former, we need to understand how conspiracy theories (and a distorted idea of critique) are being mobilized for political reasons in the current culture wars. And rather than trying to insist on keeping critique pure from the taint of its association with conspiracy theory, we need to understand what desires and resentments are enacted by conspiracy theory as a continuing, and ever-evolving, form of vernacular critique.

Beyond Conspiracy Theory and Critique

As we have seen, the idea of conspiracy theory that is offered up in alarmist comparisons with critique is often a mere placeholder, lacking any sense of the specific aesthetic forms it takes and the political functions it fulfills. By default, most token-gesture discussions of conspiracy theory in the abstract assume it is merely the evil twin of Western, Enlightenment thought. But conspiracy theories have always existed beyond the West. This is obvious, but often overlooked. Much work on conspiracy theories is highly US- or Eurocentric. However, this is starting to change. In the last decade, an emerging strand of scholarship has begun to investigate the role that conspiracy theories play in non-Western regions and cultures. Research on conspiracy theories is thus increasingly alert to the potential importance of regional, historical, and cultural difference in conspiracy theories across Europe, but there is a need to explore regions and regimes beyond Europe and the Global North. This emerging strand of research emphasizes the importance of local histories of political rule, conflict, propaganda, media regulation, education, and mechanisms of accountability. It undermines the idea of conspiracy theory as either uniquely American/European or as a universal phenomenon, merely a shared psychological style or a philosophical stance.

If we are going to be able to assess whether regional incarnations of conspiracy theories still have a relationship with critique (and what kind of relationship that is), we also need to widen our view of critique. Just as we would need to consider non-Western conspiracy theories, we would need to examine non-Western modes of critique. Taking one example will hopefully show the necessity of such a move and how it further problematizes the warnings against conspiracism to be found in critiques of critique.

The Martinican philosopher, Édouard Glissant, offers a very different model of critique than the detective-like, surface-and-depth model that, according to its critics, Western critique displays. In fact, the assumption that meaning can be retrieved from the depths is partly what Glissant takes aim at. He famously advocated "a right to opacity."[52] An ontological rather

than hermeneutic proposition, Glissant was thinking about resistance to a universalizing Western gaze and rationality that demanded minoritized subjects be transparent and readable according to its own colonial categories and modes of understanding. A right to opacity speaks to the idea that blackness cannot be known via representational systems and always falls in excess of transparency's glare. Glissant rejected any apparently progressive program that forged an ethical relation to the Other rooted through a logic of difference because of how this still produces the Other as an object. Rather, Glissant advocates a relation based on a freedom made possible by the irreducible opacity of the Other.[53] Glissant claims that projects like "depth psychology" display a "certainty that there is a universal model, a sort of archetype of humanity, difficult to circumscribe or define, of course, but one that would simultaneously ensure our knowledge in the matter and be its ultimate aim."[54] As Nicole Simek points out, conditional and temporary depth should not be confused with Glissant's notion of irreducible "density."[55] Opacity, or irreducible density, is what poetics and even politics must not give up.

We are not making any generalizable claims about Glissant as representative of non-Western critique. One might say that Glissant's contribution to a post-colonial body of work means that the West serves as too dominant a reference point to illustrate our argument; in addition, his work was influenced by French deconstruction. Nevertheless, the point stands: looking further afield, beyond a Eurocentric tradition of critique might yield other results, other ways of knowing (or encountering), that do not rely on surface and depth models. What sense would it make, therefore, to claim that critique begins to emulate conspiracy theories in the Antillean context? Or the Asian, African, or Latin American context? How can we be sure? What is lost when we assume that both critique and conspiracy theory look and act the same over space and time?

Acknowledgments

Notes

1 In this chapter, we use the term critique in the way that it has come to be used to refer to modes of reading with politics. Rather than a strict use of the term in the Kantian tradition, then, we are thinking of critique as a genre: "a form of rhetoric that is codified via style, tone, figure, vocabulary, and voice and that attends to certain tropes, motifs, and structures of texts at the expense of others." Elizabeth Anker and Rita Felski identify three facets of critique qua genre: critique is diagnostic, allegorical, and self-reflexive ("Introduction," in

Critique and Postcritique, eds. Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 1–28).

2 Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 228–229.

3 Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?" 229–230.

4 Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 34.

5 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 140.

6 Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," 123.

7 Luc Boltanski, *Mysteries and Conspiracies: Detective Stories, Spy Novels and the Making of Modern Societies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014).

8 Boltanski, *Mysteries and Conspiracies*, 32.

9 Boltanski, *Mysteries and Conspiracies*, 32.

10 Boltanski, *Mysteries and Conspiracies*, 235.

11 Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), 102.

12 Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 1–21; Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

13 Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 356.

14 Best and Marcus, "Surface Reading," 3.

15 Timothy Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).

16 Sigmund Freud, "Constructions in Analysis," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 23, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1937), 268.

17 Karl R. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (1963) (New York: Routledge, 2002), 94.

18 Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 306.

19 Clare Birchall, *Knowledge Goes Pop: From Conspiracy Theory to Gossip* (Oxford: Berg, 2006).

20 Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From the Kennedy Assassination to the X-Files* (London: Routledge, 2000).

21 Katharina Thalmann, *The Stigmatization of Conspiracy Theory since the 1950s: "A Plot to Make Us Look Foolish"* (London: Routledge, 2019), 42.

22 Symptomatic readings of popular phenomena always run the risk of accusing "the people" of false consciousness. Rather than judging the politics of conspiracy theories against an ideal that they will always fall short of, or imposing our desire to find a residual, resistant politics in popular practices, where we have employed symptomatic readings, we offer historical, political, and economic context to situate conspiracy claims (see Clare Birchall and Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Theories in the Time of Covid-19* (London: Routledge, 2022)).

23 Knight, *Conspiracy Culture; Melley, Empire of Conspiracy*.

24 Michael Butter, *Plots, Designs, and Schemes: American Conspiracy Theories from the Puritans to the Present* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014).

25 Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

26 Joseph Uscinski, et al., "Have Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories Increased Over Time?" *PLoS ONE* 17, no. 7 (2022): e0270429.

27 Michael Butter, *Plots, Designs, and Schemes*; Katharina Thalmann, *The Stigmatization of Conspiracy Theory since the 1950s: "A Plot to Make Us Look Foolish"* (London: Routledge, 2019).

28 Kenneth Saltman, *The Swindle of Innovative Educational Finance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 1–2.

29 Frida Beckman, *The Paranoid Chronotype: Power, Truth, Identity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022), 221.

30 Nancy L. Rosenblum and Russell Muirhead, *A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 2.

31 Rosenblum and Muirhead, *A Lot of People Are Saying*, 2–3.

32 Rosenblum and Muirhead, *A Lot of People Are Saying*, 3.

33 Daniël de Zeeuw and Alex Gekker, "A God-Tier LARP? QAnon as Conspiracy Fictioning." Social Media and Society 9, no. 1 (2023).

34 Douglas Selvage, "Operation 'Denver': The East German Ministry of State Security and the KGB's AIDS Disinformation Campaign, 1985–1986 (Part 1)," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 21, no. 4 (2019): 78–123.

35 Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, "The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model," *RAND Corporation*, 2019. www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html

36 Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

37 danah boyd, "You Think You Want Media Literacy…Do You?" *Data and Society*, March 9, 2018. https://points.datasociety.net/you-think-you-want-media-literacy-do-you-7cad6af18ec2

38 Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2017).

39 Thalmann, *The Stigmatization of Conspiracy Theory*.

40 Luke O'Brien, "The Making of an American Nazi," *The Atlantic*, November 14, 2017. www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/12/the-making-of-an-american-nazi/544119; Jason Wilson, "Hiding in Plain Sight: How the 'alt-Right Is Weaponizing Irony to Spread Fascism," *The Guardian*, May 23, 2017. www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/may/23/alt-right-online-humor-as-a-weapon-fascism

41 Nicholas Confessore, "How Tucker Carlson Stoked White Fear to Conquer Cable," *New York Times*, April 30, 2022. www.nytimes.com/2022/04/30/us/tucker-carlson-gop-republican-party.html

42 Butter, *Plots, Designs, and Schemes*.

43 Tommy Shane, "People Who Engage with False News Are Hyper-Concerned about Truth. But They Think It's Being Hidden," *Nieman Lab*, August 6, 2020. www.niemanlab.org/2020/08/people-who-engage-with-false-news-are-hyper-concerned-about-truth-but-they-think-its-being-hidden/

44 Nancy Baym and Jean Burgess, *Twitter: A Biography* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 62.

45 Sebastian Schindler, "The Task of Critique in Times of Post-Truth Politics," *Review of International Studies* 46, no. 3 (2020): 377.

46 Schindler, "The Task of Critique," 387.

47 In this tendency, conspiracy theory does not conform to one of the three generic qualities of critique (at least as it has been reimagined by poststructuralism) that Elizabeth Anker and Rita Felski identify: a self-reflexivity which leads to "a hypervigilance on the part of the critic" lest hermeneutic insight "fall prey to the stable, authentic or authoritarian knowledge that critique seeks to challenge" (8).

48 See Geoff Shullenberger, "Theorycels in Trump World," January 5, 2021. https://outsidertheory.com/theorycels-in-trumpworld/
49 Jeet Heer, "Trump's Racism and the Myth of 'Cultural Marxism,'" *The New Republic*, August 15, 2017. https://newrepublic.com/article/144317/trumps-racism-myth-cultural-marxism
50 Quoted in Fabiola Cineas, "Critical Race Theory, and Trump's War on It, Explained," *Vox*, September 24, 2020. www.vox.com/2020/9/24/21451220/critical-race-theory-diversity-training-trump
51 See Jules Darmanin, "French Minister Wants Inquiry into So-called Islamo-leftist Bias in Academia," *Politics*, February 17, 2021. www.politico.eu/article/french-minister-wants-inquiry-into-so-called-islamo-leftist-bias-in-academia
52 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).
53 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 190.
54 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 24.
55 Nicole Simek, "Stubborn Shadows," *symplokē* 23, no. 1–2 (2015): 367.

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9

A REPARATIVE CHRONOTOPE OF CRITIQUE

Frida Beckman

In the twenty-first century, critique is routinely identified as having its foundations in a certain form of suspicion, and even paranoia. From Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in the 1990s through Bruno Latour in the early twenty-first century to Rita Felski and the field of "postcritique" in subsequent decades, critique, the hermeneutics of suspicion as well as theories associated with Theory, a recurrent example being those of Michel Foucault, have been identified as paranoid and insufficient, if not downright detrimental, in dealing with the present. Widely different scholars and writers from widely different fields and political perspectives share this suspicion of suspicion. The span ranges from leftist-leaning scholars who are disappointed and disillusioned about the way critique seems to have been high-jacked by post-truth society in the twenty-first century to right-wing think tanks and popular populist professors against political correctness who have identified a vaguely defined and often perplexing "postmodernism" as the enemy. As such, rather established, if not outright old, fields—critique, the hermeneutics of suspicion, Theory—have come to take center stage on the battleground of what we have and should and have not and should not be doing in the humanities in general and literary studies in particular in the twenty-first century.

These debates, I have argued elsewhere, tend to both neglect and obscure some of the actual problems of the humanities in the present, problems that pertain to societal, cultural, and economic conditions that either dismiss and defund the humanities for its lack of efficiency and profit or that work against its conditions for and engagement with liberal (indeed, some suggest out-and-out leftist) thought and engagement.[1] In this sense, one had perhaps better ignore the debate around postcritique. Yet, I, and many others with

similar interests, continually fail to disregard them. I think this is because these debates, and indeed, their very existence, tell us something important about how we deal with societal, cultural, and economic problems today. In this sense, they continue to demand our attention.

In what follows, I will ask why and how Theory has come to be identified precisely as paranoid and to what extent this identification is justified and useful. Doing so includes exploring the deeper continuities and discontinuities between critique, paranoia, and conspiracy. This exploration will take place via the following steps. First, I will briefly revisit three interconnected fields— Kantian critique, Ricoeurian hermeneutics of suspicion, and Foucauldian theory. In postcritique, it is typically one or all of these fields that are at stake, in a more or less clear form and with more or less clear boundaries between them. Needless to say, these are extensive fields with permeable borders that also intersect in various ways, so I will make no attempt at taking them on as such. Rather, this reexamination will be implemented from the particular perspective of Sedgwick's seminal article about paranoid and reparative reading. My question is, quite simply, to what extent these fields are fundamentally paranoid or not.

Second, I will engage Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope. The chronotope's attention to the dynamics of space and time and what it does to conceptions of the subject is quite useful in identifying the conditions and challenges of critique at any one time. More specifically for this context, it enables me to ask what implicit postulation about the subject makes the identification of critique as paranoid possible. It will also allow me to return to questions of "strong" and "weak" theory as and in spatial terms. Thirdly, and finally, I will combine these two first dimensions to tentatively try out the idea of a reparative chronotope. At the heart of such a chronotope sits a subject that, unlike the paranoid and constantly detached subject, fully and radically accepts its limits and fluidity. Once I have revisited each of the critical fields with this in mind, I will be able to argue that while it is indeed possible—and indeed sometimes correct—to see these sprawling critical traditions as contributing to paranoid readings and conspiracy theories, what we could equally—and arguably more accurately—retrieve from them is a reparative chronotope of critique.

Critique

Admittedly, and somewhat ironically, postcritique is typically not really posited as against or after "critique" at all. Depending, of course, on how we define it. Indeed, a significant starting point of Felski's postcritical project is to make note of the fact that what literary scholars have called "critique" in recent decades is really a hermeneutics of suspicion. The concept of critique, she suggests, allows scholars to associate their projects with the

"philosophical weightiness" of Kant and Marx,[2] while the application of the term in practice has come to cover various related practices such as "symptomatic reading, ideology critique, Foucauldian historicism, various techniques of scanning texts for signs of transgression or resistance" all of which center on "an attitude of vigilance, detachment, and wariness (*suspicion*)."[3] At the same time as modern-day critics have thus borrowed a feel of gravity from a Kantian tradition, Felski also acknowledges "countless connections" between contemporary literary studies and a Western tradition of skepticism that includes thinkers such as Hume, Kant, and Nietzsche.[4] In other words, and while postcritique does not primarily position itself as post-Kantian but rather as post-Ricoeurian, the many and inevitable links back to this tradition warrants a brief excursion also to critique à la Kant.

Via Kant, we can identify three key principles of modern critique. First, of course, we find his radical suggestions about man's own capacity to think. *Sapere Aude*. This includes not just the possibility but also the responsibility toward oneself and society alike, to make use of our critical abilities. Second, Kant brings us the inevitable autocritique of critique—the very foundations of critique being built on its ability and obligation to question itself. The possibility of Kantian critique fundamentally relies on such constant self-questioning. A third key dimension that comes with Kant is the impossibility of accessing the thing in itself. With this comes the emphasis on the spatial and temporal conditions of cognition in his first critique. Because we cannot access the thing itself, any critical inquiry must necessarily include the spatiotemporal positioning and conditions of such inquiry. "It is," argues Kant, "not merely possible or probable, but indubitably certain that Space and Time, as the necessary conditions of all our external and internal experience, are merely subjective conditions of all our intuitions, in relation to which all objects are therefore mere phenomena, and not things in themselves, presented to us in this particular manner."[5]

That this attention to space and time opens up for critique as a dimension of literature and art is made particularly clear by Bakhtin when he develops the concept of the chronotope in a literary context. Bakhtin's concept builds on and continues from Kant's understanding of space and time as pure intuitions or forms of sensibility through which we grasp the elements of experience and order them through the other faculties into what we call cognition. He extends Kant's transcendental aesthetics into a tool for analyzing "forms of the most immediate reality."[6] This extension centers on the relevance of the historical and formal conditions of these intuitions and thus on space-times as they are constructed in literature and how such manifestations differ across histories and genres.

What is acknowledged via each of the three Kantian principles above is an inevitable combination of skepticism and acceptance. We can and must exercise critique even as we know that it is subject to spatiotemporal

conditions that we can never fully fathom as individuals. Therefore, we will never quite arrive at a common conception of the object at hand. Indeed, one of the aspects that made critique as it emerged with Kant so groundbreaking was precisely the faith and confidence in ordinary, fallible, human beings and its concurrent faith and confidence in critique, too, as ordinary and fallible. Worth picking up from Kant, in other words, is precisely the way he accedes to a reality in which critique can only ever be a partly failing but forever fundamental human exercise. Taking Bakhtin's chronotope back to its Kantian origins further illuminates how a chronotope of critique as it can be seen to emerge there relies heavily on fluctuating and variable space-times navigated by a subject who is fully aware of and, indeed, partly shaped by this.

Is this, to begin to integrate Sedgwick's approach, a paranoid or a reparative position? In her article about paranoid and reparative reading, Sedgwick brings forward Melanie Klein's theory of positions. Rethinking Lacan's theory of stages, Klein offers a way of recognizing, rather, a continuous vacillation between the paranoid and what she calls the reparative position. Briefly, the paranoid position is one characterized by anxiety, envy, and hatred. It is one that is always alert to the possibility of being hurt, of being cheated, of being caught unprepared. It emerges from an affect that relentlessly abstracts and amplifies dangers and threats from its surroundings. The reparative position, conversely, is marked by acceptance, and with this acceptance comes depression. In the reparative position, we accept the world—for Klein, this world is essentially and originally the mother—as fallible and sometimes hurtful. Instead of repelling and trying to protect itself from this realization by projecting its hatred and anxiety outward, the reparative position accedes to this reality and works rather "to assemble or 'repair' the murderous part-objects into something like a whole." Crucial to note, though, is that this is "*not necessarily like any preexisting whole*" but one that can be "identified with" and offer "nourishment and comfort."[7]

In postcritique debates, Sedgwick's employment of these Kleinian positions and vacillations are picked up mainly to continue and develop her questioning of the almost routine suspicion and paranoia that she identifies in literary- and queer studies toward the end of the twentieth century. As she puts it, "the methodological centrality of suspicion to current critical practice has involved a concomitant privileging of the concept of paranoia."[8] Indeed, Sedgwick's article has itself become an almost routine reference in these debates, and almost exclusively when they strive to move beyond suspicious readings. Sedgwick's text, as Felski underlines, "delivered a jolt to established frames of reference" and "kick-started a process of soul-searching that is still going on."[9] Critique is equaled to reading from the paranoid position while new modes of reading are developed along the lines of the reparative

position. Thus, the debates have tended toward a polarization between these positions rather than the vacillations of which, according to Klein, they were originally part.

Even a quick revisiting of Kant as the one above suggests that critique as it emerged through him resists such polarization between the paranoid and the reparative. Indeed, the very basis of Kantian critique relies on a combination of a critical approach with the inevitable recognition and acceptance of its inexorable imperfection. The "whole" that is aspired to in this critique is precisely not "like any preexisting whole" but one that offers exactly faith and comfort in the capricious and the inadequate. Indeed, the public sphere as a prerequisite for critique assembles and repairs, tries and ever fails, forever combining suspicion and reparation.

The Hermeneutics of Suspicion

But, and as has already been acknowledged, the critique that is under debate in the field of postcritique is less directly associated with Kant and more directly associated with the hermeneutics of suspicion. And its father, Ricoeur, is, of course, a major representative not only of the hermeneutics of suspicion but also of hermeneutics in the post-war era more generally. In statements, such as "The break between signification and the thing has already occurred with nouns, and this intervening distance marks the locus of interpretation,"[10] he captures one of this period's most central and debated dilemmas of language and interpretation. Indeed, here Kant's inaccessible "thing in itself" receives a further elaboration in theories of language and interpretation. In Ricoeurian theory, the locus of interpretation occurs with the realization of the inevitable gap between the thing itself and that which we use to account for it. Indeed, this statement appears almost banal in its self-evidence and in the long heritage it points to reaching from Plato through Kant, to Ricoeur's own poststructuralist present and onward.

The long and rich history of responses and negotiations of this inevitable gap constitutes an interesting and fruitful starting point for exploring the vacillations between paranoid and reparative responses to the same. Is the gap interpreted as keeping the real from us or is it an unavoidable and perhaps even generative dimension of language, literature, and art? A quick visit to Plato's cave shows us what could be interpreted as a paranoid interpretation of the world—reality is not what you think it is—what you see is but reflected distortions of it. And indeed, even the "real" figures that play out their shadowy spectacle on the prisoners' cave wall occupy but a second-order reality as the truly real dwells in the pure realm of forms. The set-up is based on a foundational distinction between spaces only one of which is real and another, or others, which are not and which are therefore fundamentally flawed.

   The projection of different layers of reality is akin to and a forerunner of what I have elsewhere identified as a "paranoid chronotope." This chronotope projects a dual layer of reality—one which consists of a more tangible everyday reality and one which harbors a truer reality. The history of skepticism toward the true nature of the everyday reality that we inhabit with our bodies is a long one and it recurs, of course, also in Descartes, who needs to foreswear every part of his body and all his senses in order to feel confident about his own integrity. What we see and feel may not be the real thing. Such uncertainties have continued to generate paranoid chronotopes also through liberal- and social contract thinkers such as John Locke and Thomas Hobbes and such chronotopes continue to haunt contemporary US culture and politics in their propensity to want to cleanse everyday space-times of all complexities, especially those that threaten the autonomy of the free, inviolate, liberal subject. This propensity, then, is particularly apparent among those who have traditionally held a very strong subject position.[11] At first glance, and quickly revisiting Kant again, his conception of the thing in itself as inaccessible seems to speak to a similar problematic. However, Kant offers a different dynamics and mobility than do Locke and Hobbes. With him, as we have begun to see, we can begin to envision critique as emerging via a mobile and evolving chronotope—an acceptance of the messiness of the everyday reality as an inevitable part of critical thought.

   The hermeneutics of suspicion—that seminal combination of Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx—too begins with doubt about this pesky gap. However, this hermeneutics does not, as Ricoeur notes, recognize an existence of and division between "absolute reality" and language. Importantly, this means also that the objects that we, according to earlier traditions, cannot get to or understand "in themselves" are not necessarily ascribed that truth, that site on which intentionality is transformed "into kerygma, manifestation, proclamation." In other words, the hermeneutics of suspicion as Ricoeur formulates it is not geared toward an ultimate explication of the object at all but rather toward reducing its disguises.[12] By the same logic, this hermeneutics is not aiming to reach that ultimate coincidence of consciousness and meaning, or language and object, but rather to "decipher" the expressions of consciousness.[13] The real to be reached—in Marx's case, the "real conditions of life" that are unveiled when all "that is solid melts in to air"—is not located in a realm beyond everyday life. Quite on the contrary, the "true conditions" of our oppression are very much part of this world. For Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud alike, distinctions are made rather, as we know, between the hidden and the shown, the simulated and the manifested.[14]

   In the tradition of a hermeneutics of suspicion, then, these distinctions and vacillations are not rigid and geared toward that absolute reality or truth or object to be unveiled. What emerges from this mode of interpretation is not a paranoid chronotope that relies on the separation between an everyday

and a truer reality but rather a mobile and constructive vacillation between suspicion and reparation. Nietzsche's *eternal return*, Freud's *reality principle*, and Marx' *necessity* each strive to bring out "the positive benefit of the ascesis required by a reductive and destructive interpretation."[15] With the hermeneutics of suspicion, in other words, comes a release of the anxiety to access a supposed real beyond its expressions in favor of attention precisely to these expressions and their vacillations.

It is worth underlining, then, that the aim of each of these suspicious hermeneuticians is a generative one. As Ricoeur notes, "Marx wants to liberate *praxis*," Nietzsche wants "the increase of man's power, the restoration of his force," and Freud wants the analysand to "enlarge his field of consciousness, live better, and finally be a little freer and, if possible, a little happier." All three, he underlines, "begin with suspicion concerning the illusions of consciousness" but each of them also ultimately works to extend it.[16] To further elucidate this, let us linger with each of these—as Ricoeur and the hermeneutics of suspicion have configured them—for a moment.

With *praxis*, the distinction between materialism and idealism disappears. They are no longer each other's opposites but merge and evolve. With praxis, the phenomenal/perceptible is rehabilitated and in itself becomes the grounds for consciousness. Praxis is a process of continuous revelation that is enabled via tools, language, concepts, art. Released from ownership and capitalist relations, our senses can become theorists in themselves, Marx insists, "They relate themselves to the thing for the sake of the thing, but the thing itself is an *objective human* relation to itself and to man."[17]

With *the will to power*, vertical and fixed systems of meaning are reconfigured into an immanent field. Ricoeur notes that with Nietzsche,

> the two enterprises which we at first opposed to one another—the reduction of illusions and the restoration of the fullness of meaning— are alike in that they both shift the origin of meaning to another center which is no longer the immediate subject of reflection: "consciousness"— the watchful ego, attentive to its own presence, anxious about self and attached to self.

In allowing ourselves to give in to this contradiction, we

> give ourselves up to the wonder that puts reflection in motion: it is no doubt necessary for us to be separated from ourselves, to be set off center, in order finally to know what is signified by the *I think, I am*.[18]

With *the reality principle* comes "a mediate consciousness" that simultaneously recognizes and accepts a Logos that is not omnipotent but

indefatigable. In other words, the systems that keep us from closing the gap between reality and our interpretations of it —such as language—do not consist of an almighty force but require, rather, a constant negotiation. The acceptance of the reality principle is, precisely, an acceptance—a giving up on, and even questioning the point of, a hopeless project in favor of acknowledging the inevitable presence—indeed, the only possible presence— of compromises. As for Nietzsche and Marx, this is a "confrontation with bare reality, the discipline of Ananke, of necessity."[19]

Ricoeur notes that when Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx carry the Cartesian doubt to its "stronghold," they introduce doubt also into the one dimension that he had identified as stable—"that consciousness is such as it appears to itself" as the place where "meaning and consciousness of meaning coincide."[20] Yet, Ricoeur emphasizes, this does not make them skeptics. Quite on the contrary, their destruction opens the possibility of a new foundation. All three of the masters of suspicion, Ricoeur underlines, ultimately "clear the horizon for a more authentic word, for a new reign of Truth, not only by means of a 'destructive' critique, but by the invention of an art of interpreting." Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx—"far from being detractors of 'consciousness,' aim at extending it."[21]

The chronotopic relation that emerges from the seminal thinkers of the hermeneutics of suspicion, then, is one that does not separate and project Truth, Meaning, or Reality onto a different plane than that of the subject that negotiates them. Rather, what emerges with them is a chronotope that, in the process of recognizing the failing autonomy and transcendence of the subject, simultaneously also acknowledges the inevitable fallibility of Truth, Meaning, and Reality. Unlike models such as Plato's, Descartes', Hobbes', and Locke's, in which those entities, be it the Subject or Truth, were seen as autonomous or transcendent, the underlying chronotope of a hermeneutics of suspicion appears as less paranoid than reparative.

Theory

The hermeneutics of suspicion is very much part of what came to be called "Theory," or, sometimes "French theory" in an American literary context from the 1970s onward. Across this decade and the next, a whole set of variegated theories emerging from French linguists, sociologists, historians, and philosophers were imported and came to gain considerable influence in and on American scholarship. "Theory," which did not exist as such in France, considerably influenced not only interpretative practices and methods but the very structure of scholarship as well as teaching in the humanities. In particular, and of key importance in the present context, it influenced a whole generation of literary scholars and critics.

While this field thus includes many different theoretical angles, Foucault stood and continues to stand out as a key thinker of Theory. "Even in comparison with Derrida," as François Cusset notes,

> who became an icon and an institution during his lifetime, Foucault's long-term impact in the United States remains unequaled, both in terms of his books sold in translation [...] and in the range of fields of study he has transformed or brought into existence.[22]

And his work continues to be among those most commonly and persistently associated with Theory in the twenty-first century. More specifically, his conception of power is one of the features that is most doggedly associated with theory-as-conspiracy in postcritique debates. This has its historical reasons. The American Foucault is not the same as the French one, as Cusset points out. Of the several differences noted, a key one is the unrivaled centrality that the former has given to Foucault's work on knowledge/power. Via this emphasis, the French theorist provided US readers with the motivation to push academia more toward social and political engagement with the help of what emerged as "a veritable *conspiracy theory*, in the name of which they scoured society to uncover its aggressors and victims."[23] And indeed, writing about the infiltration of power on all levels of the self and society certainly seems to mirror conspiratorial thinking. But is it really Foucauldian theory that is conspiratorial? Or is it the clash between Foucauldian theory and American conceptions of an autonomous subject that can be separated from power, from embodiment, and from the social, which induces a paranoid response? Is it perhaps here that theory tends to become "strong theory" in Sedgwick's and Frank's Tomkinsian sense, that is, one that is ceaselessly expanded and accumulatively coherent because it has failed to accustom itself to, and thereby minimize the negative affect of, anxiety?

The cultural paranoia that has become so prevalent today emerges precisely through the conflict between a conception of an autonomous liberal subject and a reluctant realization that such a position is not tenable in relation to contemporary power. Timothy Melley calls this the "agency panic" of the American post-war period: a "troubled defense of an old but increasingly beleaguered concept of personhood—the idea that the individual is a rational, motivated agent with a protected interior core of beliefs, desires, and memories."[24] This tends to result, as my previous research has suggested, in the projection of a paranoid chronotope: an attempted redemption of the idea of the liberal subject by projecting all-encompassing explanations over it all. This tension and the propensity toward such projections is particularly apparent among those who have traditionally identified themselves and been identified with a very strong subject position. In effect, and as expressed via

the projection of a dual-layer chronotope, the porous and fragile borders of the individual seem to be salvaged and strengthened. This subject is thereby positioned, not as inevitably immersed in and entangled with, but as menacingly under threat from, power.

Foucauldian theory certainly addresses the complexities and interrelations of the subject and power. Felski is right, of course, that Foucault sees power as "diffused throughout society via undetectable capillaries of control: a micropolitics of discourse that molded the contours of personhood all the way down."[25] But I would invite us to interrogate whether this automatically generates a paranoid position. Because is it not only if our starting point is with an autonomous subject that Foucault's conception of power appears as paranoid? If we instead take it for what it is, we can equally, if not more appropriately, recognize it as closer to a reparative position. It is reparative because it does not, like the paranoid position, simply project its anxieties onto an external, hurtful, or even evil enemy—in this case, power. Rather, it absolutely accepts that power is an integral part of both the self and others. For Foucault, we must recall, critique and the subject emerge in tandem. Their concomitant emergence occurs, he writes in "What is Critique?", via the impulse of not wanting to be "governed quite so much."[26] Because the subject itself emerges with this very impulse, this desire cannot be a matter of not being "governed *at all*."[27] Without governing, no subject. The emphasis on "the art of not being governed quite so much," then, is completely central as it underscores to Foucault's well-known stance on the impossibility of detracting the subject from power.

Sedgwick writes about the "desire of a reparative impulse" as being "additive and accretive." "Its fear," she underlines, is "a realistic one" that comes with the realization "that the culture surrounding it is inadequate or inimical to its nurture." But, and crucially, this fear also comes with the desire "to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self."[28]

"Inchoate self" seems like a key term here as it recognizes a subject that does not preexist or transcend its surroundings but that emerges in continuous negotiations of existing conditions. Assembling and conferring plenitude in order to ascertain resources to contribute to the inchoate self can then be recognized as a search for a relative level of selfhood and independence both in spite and because of the power structures of which it is part. Could not this "inchoate self" and its vacillation and negotiation of an inadequate and inimical but also potentially generative environment constitute one way to account for Foucault's classic "subject to/subject of" relation?

A distinction between a paranoid and a reparative chronotope helps us recognize this tension between a paranoid position stemming from the duality "power vs subject" and a reparative position that emerges rather from an immanent construction of "power + subject."

Foucauldian theory does also in itself contain attention to space and time that can be usefully brought out via the concept of the chronotope. Foucault, as we know, recurrently emphasizes the history, or perhaps genealogy of the subject. Via the concept of the dispositif, he enables a mapping of constituents and coordinates of power at any one time. The dispositif, with its attention to visibility, enunciation, force, subjectification, and fracture, takes quite seriously the spatiotemporal—that is, the chronotopic— dimensions of power and the relation between these dimensions and the subject. In my conceptualization, it is the denial and projection of such dimensions onto a separate layer—for example via a conspiracy theory— that generates a paranoid chronotope. A reparative chronotope, on the other hand, stays with this trouble. It allows for the "unmystified view of systemic oppressions" that Sedgwick ascribes to the reparative position. It practices a form of knowing that can recognize, as she puts it, "the reality or gravity or enmity or oppression" without for that matter locking itself up into "any specific train of epistemological or narrative consequences."[29]

Arguably, then, and because the aspiration to expel the messy reality of the spatiotemporal conditions of the subject in order to secure a transcendent position is made redundant, Foucault lays the grounds for a reparative chronotope, a reparative chronotope that is such because it takes very seriously the spatiotemporal conditions from which the subject emerges and which both oppress and enable it. As he asks,

> the question is being raised: "what, therefore, am I," I who belong to this humanity, perhaps to *this piece of it, at this point in time*, at this instant of humanity which is subjected to the power of truth in general and truths in particular?[30]

The "whole" that it assembles from existing conditions is potentially reparative because it is open to motives, positionalities, and contingencies within the space-time in which it is embodied—to the actual, if momentary, "lines of subjectification" it allows for. The trick, then, is to more fully acknowledge the spatiotemporal conditions that the subject needs to negotiate in order to emerge as such.

In this sense, and although Foucauldian theory is often seen as a "strong theory" in its totalizing tendencies, it is rather a "weak theory" in so far as it is attuned to local terrains and textures. A key measurement of theory as weak or strong as Sedgwick and Frank read Tomkins, is found in "the size and topology of the domain it organizes and its methods of determining that terrain."[31] In its accumulative anxiety, strong theory will apply itself across an ever-widening territory without being too particular about local qualities and differences. Weak theory, on the other hand, will not "evacuate" terrains of their specific qualities but will expand only to analogically similar situations.[32] Weak

theory is also prepared to acknowledge its inability to immediately theorize an unknown terrain without for that matter refraining from approaching and describing it. It seeks to know, as Paul K. Saint-Amour puts it, "but not necessarily to know better than its object."[33] In this light, Foucault's theory is weak and it also quite clearly contains the Kleinian vacillations between paranoid and reparative positions. Indeed, and quite in line with the power versus subject and power + subject distinction, Foucault is quite far from the conception of the former and quite solidly based within the logic of the latter.

A Reparative Chronotope of Critique

Whether "critique" denominates Kantian critique, a Ricoeurian hermeneutics of suspicion, or Foucauldian theory, then, it pays considerable attention to the intricacies and infiltrations of power, language, and subjectivity. At first glance, this certainly does position these approaches as suspects in the fields of paranoid reading. What I have started to argue here, however, is that they all, in spite of—no, in fact, because of—all this, generally and ultimately tend toward the reparative rather than the paranoid position. Because, as I have begun to ask, is it not only from the perspective of a specific idea of the individual, one that separates power from the subject, that "critique" emerges as and generates a paranoid effect? None of the critical fields at stake in here make this type of separation. Quite on the contrary, as we have seen, a central feature of each of them is the acceptance of power as an inevitable dimension of the subject. So what happens if we "stay with the trouble," to borrow Donna Haraway's phrase? What happens if we refuse to see critique, the hermeneutics of suspicion, and Theory as this separate layer that projects conspiratorial explanation models unto the world? One way of staying with the trouble, which I will try in the remainder of this chapter, is to stay with Sedgwick and to revisit and recuperate the reparative alternatives that she offers. So, what do we gain from developing what I have only hinted at so far, that is, if we try to think of critique, the hermeneutics of suspicion, and Theory as all tending more toward a reparative chronotope?

Let us first revisit the paranoid chronotope. This chronotope is a rather rigid construction. While it can be recognized and/or applied in many different kinds of situations, its dual layers are dependent precisely on protecting the individual subject from the dangers that threaten to undo it as such. From Descartes through Locke and Hobbes and onward, the inclination has been precisely to disregard or even disclaim embodiment in order to salvage a conception of a transcendent subject. Much of the critique that has become paranoid about critique being paranoid follows a similar dynamic. Rather than acknowledging the complexities of contemporary power and the concomitant complexities of the theories that have addressed them, these entanglements are expelled and positioned as if they themselves

form a menacing layer. In this paranoid chronotope of postcritique there seems to be the world and living creatures and culture on the one hand and on the other, a critique/suspicious hermeneutics/Theory that suppresses the more reparative, generous, creative dimensions of these.[34] In other words, we are stuck with "strong theory."

A reparative chronotope of critique, on the other hand, would necessarily have to be more porous and malleable. It would have to be weak. Precisely because it accepts complexities and fallibility, it includes these components—and their impressionability—within itself. In other words, a reparative chronotope does not deny or expel power and oppression but, rather, coexists with and accepts them. Acknowledging configurations of power that we precisely cannot altogether understand or transcend is a dimension of weak theory and generates a reparative stance. A reparative chronotope would also have to be simultaneously more embodied and less specific than its paranoid counterpart. It would acknowledge and take as a starting point the actual conditions of bodies and their desires and affects at any one time. It would also accept that those bodies, desires, and affects are intimately entangled with forces that they cannot fully fathom. This acceptance, importantly, is not the same as accepting oppression and refraining from resistance. Rather, it is an acceptance that recognizes and affirms the complexity of its own starting point. A reparative chronotope, in other words, would reflect an individual subject that accepts its own dethroning from (the idea of) a transcendent, autonomous position. There is no preexisting subject that is then threatened by surrounding structures and powers but, rather, the subject emerges precisely through and by negotiating them.

I would argue that this reflects quite well a type of understanding of the subject that recurs in the various and overlapping forms of critique as brought up here. Most obviously, perhaps, we see it in a Foucauldian conception of the subject as emerging through critique *and* through power. Foucault emphasizes the importance of the specific but fluctuating conditions for the subject. To be usefully understood, power must be reduced to its current domains and procedures. In other words, the subject emerges via a chronotope that is on the one hand very specific and on the other hand, by its nature, historically, socially, and culturally variable. In a sense, it is even more important to analyze it as a chronotope precisely because these conditions are mutable. They are analog rather than digital, in Sedgwick's and Frank's terms, because they are acknowledged as textured and proximate rather than "expandable by analogies evacuated of certain qualities."[35] So, and to nonetheless try to begin to concretize the reparative chronotope, its key elements would have to be

1 It is inevitably and inescapably and importantly actualized.
2 It leaves the subject open and vulnerable to various and varying forces.

3 Its subject is not only immanent but also potentially stronger in its
   (depressive) acknowledgment of its own tenuous conditions.

Unlike the paranoid chronotope, in which space-time is forcibly divided
into two in order to separate and salvage a transcendent subject from the
messiness of power, the reparative chronotope voluntarily not only affirms
but also negotiates the complexity of a single layer. Compared with the
paranoid position, as Sedgwick puts it,

> the reparative reading position undertakes a different range of affects,
> ambitions, and risks. What we can best learn from such practices are,
> perhaps, the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting
> sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed
> desire has often been not to sustain them.[36]

The reparative chronotope helps us recover or rediscover critique. Critique,
as Foucault writes, "will be the art of voluntary insubordination, that of
reflected intractability. Critique would essentially insure the desubjugation
of the subject in the context of what we could call, in a word, the politics
of truth."[37] The paranoid chronotope strives for such desubjugation via the
rejection and projection of power outward, an attempt to separate the subject
from power. This is also, arguably, what enables "the politics of truth" to
become one of alternative facts and post-truth. In the reparative chronotope,
on the other hand, desubjugation becomes possible via processes immanent
to its own conditions. A Kleinian and Sedgwickian way of approaching it
would be via precisely the focus on "repairing." The reparative position, we
can recall, is one that "repairs" the horrors of the subject and power into
"something like a whole"—a whole that is not a preexisting one but that
enables identification.

Conclusion

The crack between the thing itself and that which we use to account for it,
between the real and our representations, between language and meaning
may also be where the light gets in. But, and as we have begun to see, this
crack elicits different kinds of light, differences that can be further illuminated
via the concept of the chronotope. The chronotope, as Bakhtin develops
it and traces it through literary history, speaks to as well as configures
conceptions and perceptions of the individual subject. These conceptions
emerge from and through the specific configurations of the space-time at
hand—is it, for example, abstract or detailed, interchangeable or specific?
Does it seem to exist independently of and perhaps even influence and
shape literary characters or is it shaped and mastered by them? In terms of

the different responses to hermeneutics, the different constructions of the relation between the subject and its spatiotemporal surroundings illuminate a crucial difference. The chronotope helps us see a tradition that positions language, power, desires, and other obstacles to reaching the truest truth, as a disruption of and distanciation from reality and also how such conceptions construct and reconstruct a paranoid chronotope. From the perspective of key thinkers of critique, however, these are not obstacles but entanglements and are therefore recognized rather as an inevitable starting point. They thereby not only acknowledge but also build constructively around this crack what is then rather a reparative chronotope. Affirming and enfolding the crack, this tradition has as its very starting point the decentering of man and the acceptance of the entanglements of subjects, language, power, desire. As Ricoeur underlines in his account of Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud, all three of them recognize that "the home of meaning is not consciousness but something other than consciousness."[38]

Certainly, society in the twenty-first century incessantly gears us toward paranoia via the endless reconfigurations of neoliberalism, via polarization, and via the seemingly unbridled proliferation of conspiracy theories. The more difficult it is to perceive the locus and nature of power, the more inclined we are to rediscover something tangible toward which we can direct our critique and in relation to which we can thereby also emerge more clearly to ourselves and to others. It is through these tendencies that conspiracy theories become rewarding. But, and as we all know, really, critique, the hermeneutics of suspicion, and Theory typically take as their starting point precisely the questioning of the autonomous subject. As I have shown in this chapter, there is a crucial sense in which critique and interpretation become possible precisely because of and through such questioning in the first place.

Therefore, we have very little to gain from inscribing critique into contemporary tendencies toward paranoia and conspiracy. It is a powerful but crippling resemblance, one that is now also frequently evoked by right-wing and post-truth forces. It is undoubtedly so that the critical traditions at stake here have repeatedly contributed to overly suspicious ways of reading. But this seems an insufficient reason to give up on the originals. Ultimately, we might need to ask what is the real problem here. Is it that *Theory* is paranoid or is it that Theory has been *identified* and *positioned* as paranoid? Or, to put it differently, what precisely is the weak and the strong theory in this context? In this light, I suggest, we would do better to affirm Klein's depressive position. If we take Klein's theory of positions seriously, we also need to recognize that we are not dealing with anything consistent. There is a continuous vacillation of and in critique, the hermeneutics of suspicion, and Theory between positions that not only recognize alertness and suspicion but also ultimately strive toward the reparative. This is not, as

I hope I have shown, a rethinking or reconfiguring of critique at all. Rather, it is a recognition of the reparative dimensions already present in—indeed sometimes even integral to—it.

Notes

1 See Frida Beckman, *The Paranoid Chronotope: Power, Truth, Identity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022).
2 Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 7.
3 Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 3.
4 Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 36.
5 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), trans. John Miller Dow Meiklejohn (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications Inc, 2003), 39.
6 Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 85.
7 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity.* (Durham and London. Duke University Press, 2002), 128.
8 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 125.
9 Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 35.
10 Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 22.
11 See Beckman, *The Paranoid Chronotope.*
12 Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven and London: Yale University Press: 1970), 30.
13 Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 33.
14 Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 34.
15 Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 35.
16 Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 34–35.
17 Karl Marx, "Private Property and Communism," *Economic Philosophical Manuscripts of 1944*, February 19, 2023. www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Economic-Philosophic-Manuscripts-1844.pdf
18 Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 54–55
19 Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 35.
20 Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 33.
21 Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 34–35.
22 François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, trans. Jeff Fort (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 279.
23 Cusset, *French Theory*, 280.
24 Timothy Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2000), viii.
25 Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 97.
26 Michel Foucault, "What is Critique?", in *The Politics of Truth: Michel Foucault*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer and Lysa Hochroth, trans. Lysa Hochroth (New York: Semiotext(e), 1997), 29.
27 Foucault, "What is Critique?", 73; emphasis in original.
28 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 149.
29 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 124.
30 Foucault, "What is Critique?", 46; my emphasis.
31 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins," *Critical Inquiry* 21, no. 2 (1995): 519, n. 19.
32 Sedgwick and Frank, "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold," 519, n. 19.

33 Paul K. Saint-Amour, "Weak Theory, Weak Modernism," *Modernisms/ Modernity* 25, no. 3 (2018): 444.

34 See the critique sections of Beckman, *The Paranoid Chronotope* for a further development of this argument.

35 Sedgwick and Frank, "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold," 519, n. 19.

36 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 150–151.

37 Foucault, "What is Critique?", 32.

38 Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 55.

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10

CONSPIRING WITH THEORY

Popper, Antitheory, and the Epistemology of Ignorance

Jeffrey R. Di Leo

While it may very well be true that the thought of Karl Popper is a time-capsule of the excesses of harsh criticism in the face of a world shocked and devastated by the rise of totalitarianism and world war, his panegyric to open society and denunciation of Marxism has continued to hold some sway. The most obvious examples of this are the Open Society Foundations, which support "organizations across the globe fighting for freedom of expression, accountable government, and societies that promote justice and equality,"[1] and the formation of the Central European University (CEU).

Formed in 1990 to support the newly independent Central and Eastern European countries in their transition after the fall of the Soviet Union, the CEU was founded by George Soros, who had been a student of Popper's at the London School of Economics. Soros is also the leader of the Open Society Foundations, which describes itself as "a network of foundations, partners, and projects in more than 120 countries."[2] The name of the foundation and its work are intended to foreground the influence of Popper, who they say "argues that no philosophy or ideology is the final arbiter of truth, and that societies can only flourish when they allow for democratic governance, freedom of expression, and respect for individual rights."[3]

According to Michael Ignatieff, the CEU was established to assist "former communist societies undergoing the arduous and uncertain transition to democracy and a market economy."[4] The task of this university, says Ignatieff, "was to provide advanced education in the social sciences and humanities for societies whose universities had been shackled by the closed society thinking of official Marxism."[5] Ignatieff, who served as President and Rector of CEU between 2016 and 2021, a period of turbulence that saw its expulsion from Budapest and its re-establishment in Vienna, says its

mission is "to uphold the values of open society—freedom, justice, tolerance, democracy, and respect for knowledge."[6] "These values," he continues following Popper's line of thought regarding knowledge and belief, "risk becoming empty slogans unless we subject them to continual scrutiny and re-appraisal."[7]

In this chapter, I revisit the epistemological and social science vision of Popper. It can be broken down into four major areas, which also correspond, in turn, to the four main sections of this chapter: (1) Popper's critique of historicism, and along with it, Marxism; (2) Popper's conspiracy theory of ignorance; (3) Popper's conspiracy theory of society; and (4) Popper's conspiracy theory of theory. While accounts of Popper with respect to conspiracy theory tend to focus only on (3), that is, his conspiracy theory of society, my contention is that they are incomplete without also taking into account the other three areas of his epistemological and social science vision.

Part of the reason for undertaking this task is that through the philanthropy of Soros, the philosophy of Popper has come to be associated today with the Open Society Foundations and the CEU. As a university founded at a time when "critical thinking …was an alien concept for most universities in the former Communist bloc,"[8] the implication is that Marxist theory is dangerous because it closes down critical thinking—something that the open society and its universities (including the CEU) do not do. But more broadly speaking, the other implication here is that any theory that is not falsifiable is equally dangerous. Theories that might be included in this list of ones that are not falsifiable include structuralism and poststructuralism, psychoanalytic theory, LGBTQ+ theory, and critical race theory.

The question that we will ask here is whether the legacies of Popper that conspire *against* theory for the betterment of the world achieve their aim— or whether conspiring with theory is at the present moment a surer path to improving the world. With 32 billion dollars pumped into the Open Society Foundations initiative since 1984, and 18 billion in 2017 alone, the legacy of Popper could very well be the most well-funded version of antitheory in history.[9] While many in literary and cultural theory, including myself, have focused their attention on the several million that Rita Felski got to fund her own version of antitheory, the philanthropic work of Soros and company makes the financial backing for postcritique look like penny candy.[10]

Thus, the question of whether Popper's form of antitheory contributes to the betterment of the world is not merely an epistemological argument to be logically analyzed, but also a social and educational strategy that can be judged by its effects in the real world. The fact that Popper associates theory with *conspiracy*, and antitheory with its avoidance, is, as we shall see, a key part of his epistemological and social science agenda for a better world. For him, a better world is one bereft of conspiracy—one marked by freedom, justice, tolerance, democracy, and knowledge, rather than their denial. It is

also one marked by an absence of theory that cannot be falsified, which, as already noted, is the majority of what we call today *critical theory*.

Against Historicism

When Karl Popper was 20 years old, he became an apprentice to Adalbert Pösch, an old master cabinetmaker in Vienna. A university student at the time, Popper claims that he learned more about the theory of knowledge from this "omniscient master" than from any of his teachers. "For it was my master who taught me not only how very little I knew," wrote Popper in his autobiography, "but also that any wisdom to which I might ever aspire could consist only in realizing more fully the infinity of my ignorance."[11]

Popper worked with this omniscient cabinetmaker for two years, after which he decided that he was "too ignorant and too fallible" to make mahogany writing desks for the rest of his life. So he did social work with neglected children for a year, and then after five more years mainly spent studying and writing, he became a schoolteacher in 1930. He says that at that point he had no other professional ambitions. Still, after the publication of *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* in 1935, he started to grow tired of schoolteaching.

In this early book, he famously argued that science should adopt a methodology based on falsifiability because no number of experiments can ever prove a theory, but a reproducible experiment or observation can refute one. However, writes Popper, "non-reproducible single occurrences are of no significance to science."[12] "Thus a few stray basic statements contradicting a theory will hardly induce us to reject it as falsified,"[13] he continues. "We shall take it as falsified only if we discover a *reproducible effect* which refutes the theory."[14] This notion of falsifiability is one that Paul Ricoeur regards as similar to his own conception of "invalidation," wherein the role of falsification is played by the conflict between competing interpretations of the text. "An interpretation," writes Ricoeur, "must not only be probable, but more probable than another."[15] "There are criteria of relative superiority," he continues, "which may easily be derived from the logic of subjective probability."[16] According to Ricoeur, it is the falsification of Popper found in *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* that renders easier this derivation.[17]

Two years after the publication of *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, Popper gave up schoolteaching and became a professional philosopher. He was 34 years old and said, "I thought that I had now finally solved the problem of how to work on a writing desk and yet be preoccupied with epistemology."[18] But long before Popper became a professional philosopher, his opinion of communism and Marxism had been established by an event that occurred shortly before he turned 17.

In the spring of 1919, Popper regarded himself as a communist. While he was suspicious of communists, he relented to the view that they were pacifists, who primarily stood for peace. He also believed that they were "against all 'unnecessary' violence."[19] But it took only one incident that year to turn him against communism for life, and to start down a path that would lead him away from Marxism as well. As he tells it,

> In Vienna, a shooting broke out during a demonstration by unarmed young socialists who, instigated by the communists, tried to help some communists to escape who were under arrest in the central police station in Vienna. Several young socialist and communist workers were killed. I was horrified and shocked by the brutality of the police, but also by myself. For I felt that as a Marxist I bore part of the responsibility for the tragedy—at least in principle. Marxist theory demands that the class struggle be intensified, in order to speed up the coming of socialism. Its thesis is that although the revolution may claim some victims, capitalism is claiming more victims than the whole socialist revolution.[20]

The shock and horror of this experience was one that Popper says resulted in "a life-long revulsion of feeling."[21] It also led him to ask whether the calculation that the socialist revolution will claim *some* victims but that capitalism will claim *more* "could ever be supported by 'science'."[22]

Popper describes communism as a creed based on knowledge of the laws of historical development, which promises to bring about a better world. The tragedy that he experienced turned him against communism after only two or three months of adopting it as his creed. He says that while he "still hoped for a better world, a less violent and more just world," the event led him to question what he thought he knew about the philosophy of Marx and Engels—and to ask whether or not it was just pretense. Moreover, he questioned the extent to which he had understood not only Marxist theory, but also the extent to which he had "examined it *critically* as anybody should do before he accepts a creed which justifies its means by a somewhat distant end."[23]

The realization that he had accepted a "complex theory" and a "dangerous creed" *uncritically* shocked him to his epistemological core. And, from the time he was 17, he had become an "anti-Marxist" for life. He describes Marxist theory as dogmatic and arrogant. "It was a terrible thing to arrogate to oneself a kind of knowledge which made it a duty to risk the lives of other people for an uncritically accepted dogma," writes Popper, "or for a dream which might turn out not to be realizable."[24] "It was particularly bad for an intellectual," he continues, "for one who could read and think."[25] "It was awfully depressing to have fallen into such a trap."[26]

But it would not be until the year of publication of *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* that Popper would begin to write about Marxism. While he

shared some of his thoughts with his friends, he dared not to publish them because "anti-Marxism in Austria was a worse thing than Marxism: since the social democrats were Marxists, anti-Marxism was very nearly identical with those authoritarian movements which were later called fascist."[27] The major works that resulted from this period where he began to publish his thoughts on Marxism were *The Poverty of Historicism* (1957), which began as a paper he read in 1936, and *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945).

Both books are highly critical of Marxism. In his preface to the second edition of *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, written in 1950, five years after its initial publication, Popper apologizes for the harshness of its tone. He says that his decision to write it was "made in March 1938, on the day I received news of the invasion of Austria."[28] Completed in 1943, the majority of the book was "written during the grave years when the outcome of the war was uncertain," a time that Popper felt he should not "mince words."[29] Still, while neither the war nor any other contemporary event was directly mentioned in the book, "it was an attempt to understand those events and their background, and some of the issues which were likely to arise after the war was won."[30] While some saw the aim of the book as a critique of Marxism, Popper regards its purpose to be a much wider one, wherein Marxism is but one of the many "mistakes we have made in the perennial and dangerous struggle for building a better and freer world."[31]

His original preface, however, written before the outcome of the war was decided, provides a different apology for the harshness of its contents. Writes Popper,

> If in this book harsh words are spoken about some of the greatest among the intellectual leaders of mankind, my motive is not, I hope, the wish to belittle them. It springs rather from my conviction that, if our civilization is to survive, we must break with the habit of deference to great men. Great men make great mistakes; and as the [*The Open Society and Its Enemies*] tries to show, some of the greatest leaders of the past supported the perennial attack on freedom and reason. Their influence, too rarely challenged, continues to mislead those on whose defence [sic] civilization depends, and to divide them. The responsibility for this tragic and possibly fatal division becomes ours if we hesitate to be outspoken in our criticism of what admittedly is part of our intellectual heritage. By our reluctance to criticize some of it, we may help to destroy all of it.[32]

Contrary, however, to Popper's apologies for the harshness of the tone of his critique in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, there is no similar statement to be found concerning his logical refutation of historicism in *The Poverty of Historicism*. Rather, what one finds here is a doubling-down on his argument, coupled with a dedication of the book to the "memory of the

countless men and women of all creeds or nations who fell victim to the fascist and communist belief in Inexorable Laws of Historical Destiny."[33]

Popper's argument in *The Poverty of Historicism* can be traced back to the winter of 1919, and his tragic albeit brief flirtation with communism. It was at this time that he came to believe that "there can be no prediction of the course of human history by scientific or any other rational methods."[34] For him, "the belief in historical destiny is sheer superstition,"[35] albeit a deadly one. Popper notes that one of his former students who first heard him read his 1936 paper "The Poverty of Historicism" at a private session in the house of a friend was Dr. Karl Hilferding, who was "soon to fall a victim of the Gestapo and of the historicist superstitions of the Third Reich."[36]

Popper's refutation of historicism is a logical argument that can be summarized as follows:

1. The course of human history is strongly influenced by the growth of human knowledge.
2. We cannot predict, by rational or scientific methods, the future growth of our scientific knowledge.
3. This means that we must reject the possibility of a *theoretical history*; that is to say, of a historical social science that would correspond to *theoretical physics*. There can be no scientific theory of historical development serving as a basis for historical prediction.
4. The fundamental aim of historicist methods is therefore misconceived, and historicism collapses.[37]

For Popper, this argument logically proves that "no society can predict, scientifically, its own future states of knowledge."[38] He concedes, however, that even if we grant that this argument is valid, it may still be an argument "without any real significance."[39] Still, he believes that this argument against historicism has *intellectual* significance, particularly as it bears upon events from the history of historicist thought from Heraclitus and Plato to Hegel and Marx discussed, for example, in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*.

The Conspiracy Theory of Ignorance

In 1960, Popper delivered the Annual Philosophical Lecture to the British Academy. He surprised and offended some of his colleagues by entitling it "On the Sources of Knowledge and of Ignorance." While the first part of the title, "On the Sources of Knowledge," was regarded as standard fare for an epistemologist at the time, the latter part, concerning the sources "of Ignorance," was not and raised some philosophical eyebrows. As his friend put it, "Ignorance is something negative: it is the absence of knowledge."[40]

"But," he continued, "how on earth can the absence of anything have sources?"[41] Unsure how to respond, Popper said the following:

> I told him that I hoped to direct attention, through the phrasing of this title, to a number of historically important although unrecorded philosophical doctrines and among them, especially, to a *conspiracy theory of ignorance* which interprets ignorance not as a mere lack of knowledge but as the work of some mischievous power, the source of impure and evil influences which pervert and poison our minds and instill in us the habit of resistance to knowledge.[42]

Thus, for Popper, the *sources* of ignorance in the British and Continental schools of philosophy often involve conspiracy theory, which although unstated is nonetheless a consequence of their stated philosophical doctrines.

As Popper sees it, "the quarrel between the classical empiricism of Bacon, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, and Mill," that is, the British school, and "the classical rationalism or intellectualism of Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz," that is, the Continental school, is overstated.[43] Though it is true that "the British school insisted that the ultimate source of all knowledge is observation, while the Continental school insisted that it was the intellectual intuition of clear and distinct ideas," the "differences between classical empiricism and rationalism are much smaller than their similarities."[44] Moreover, Popper argues that both classical empiricism and classical rationalism are "mistaken" even though he considers himself both an empiricist and a rationalist. While both empiricism and rationalism are correct to emphasize observation and reason, the roles that they assign to them are the wrong ones. For Popper, "neither observation nor reason can be described as a source of knowledge, in the sense which they have been claimed to be sources of knowledge, down to the present day,"[45] which at the time of this lecture was 1960.

Popper believes, like Bertrand Russell, that questions of the sources of knowledge and ignorance, that is, epistemology, have "practical consequences for science, for ethics, and even for politics."[46] Like Russell, Popper contends that "epistemological relativism, or the idea that there is no such thing as objective truth, and epistemological pragmatism, or the idea that truth is the same as usefulness, are closely linked with authoritarianism and totalitarian ideas."[47] Moreover, he argues that liberalism *requires* a belief in objective facts. That is to say, the liberal belief in "the possibility of a rule of law, of equal justice, of fundamental rights, and a free society" may be able to survive mistakes by judges about the facts of a case, but it cannot survive "the acceptance of an epistemology that teaches there are no objective facts."[48] For him, if there are no facts, then judges cannot make factual mistakes because they can no more be wrong about the facts than right about them.

As such, epistemological *optimism*, that is, optimism regarding our power to discern the truth and to acquire knowledge, is essential to liberalism. Moreover, for Popper, at the heart of epistemological optimism is

> the doctrine that *truth is manifest*. Truth may perhaps be veiled. But it may reveal itself. And if it does not reveal itself, it may be revealed to us. Removing the veil may not be easy. But once the naked truth stands revealed before our eyes, we have the power to see it, to distinguish it from falsehood, and know that it *is* truth.[49]

In terms of the truth "revealing itself," Popper references Spinoza, who says, "Indeed, just as light makes manifest both itself and darkness, so truth is the standard both of itself and falsity."[50] Also, for Popper, this optimistic epistemology wherein *truth is manifest* inspired the birth of modern science and technology. Through Bacon and Descartes, who "taught that there was no need for any man to appeal to authority in matters of truth because each man carried the sources of knowledge in himself,"[51] sense perception and intellectual intuition became central ideas in modern epistemology.

Moreover, the opposite of epistemological optimism also exists: *epistemological pessimism*. For Popper, epistemological pessimism involves disbelief in the power of reason to discern the truth. Epistemological pessimism, he writes,

> is linked, historically, with a doctrine of human depravity, and it tends to lead to the demand for the establishment of powerful traditions and the entrenchment of a powerful authority which would save man from his folly and his wickedness.[52]

Whereas epistemological optimism is associated with liberalism and rationalism (i.e., because knowledge is possible, so too is freedom), epistemological pessimism is linked to authoritarianism and epistemological traditionalism (i.e., because objective truth is not discernible, one must choose between accepting authority or chaos). Finally, though reason and empirical science provides the epistemological optimist the grounds to critique tradition and authority, they do not provide a similar benefit to the epistemological pessimist.

What is interesting and somewhat counterintuitive in Popper's analysis here is that the conspiracy theory of knowledge is a consequence of epistemological optimism, but not epistemological pessimism. This means that he locates conspiracy theory as a consequence of liberalism—or at least some versions of liberalism. Thus, as a liberal and an epistemologist, who identifies with both empiricism *and* rationalism, Popper claims that he

"aims to find out the truth about the problems of epistemology, whether or not this truth fits with my political ideals."[53] As liberalism is one of Popper's political ideals, his efforts to expose the weaknesses of liberal epistemology are an entirely self-inflicted wound, especially since he claims to be the one who discovered the conspiracy theory of ignorance. "This may seem to some a perverse plan," comments Popper, but "it may be our best plan to start by criticizing our most cherished beliefs."[54]

For Popper, the conspiracy theory of ignorance that is a consequence of optimist epistemology may be summarized as follows:

> Ignorance may be the work of powers conspiring to keep us in ignorance, poison our minds by filling them with falsehood, and to blind our eyes so that they cannot see the manifest truth. Such prejudices and such powers, then, are sources of ignorance.[55]

For him, the conspiracy theory of ignorance that is associated both with versions of liberalism and with the theory of manifest truth is a myth. In addition, as it is a myth that is the consequence of some versions of liberal epistemology, it is a serious limitation of this optimistic epistemology—a limitation that renders the optimistic epistemology of Bacon and of Descartes a *false epistemology.*

For Popper, the situation that a false epistemology underlies liberalism is a strange one. Not only did this false epistemology encourage people "to think for themselves," but it also was "the major inspiration of an intellectual and moral revolution without parallel in history."[56] Additionally,

> It encouraged men to think for themselves. It gave them hope that through knowledge they might free themselves and others from servitude and misery. It made modern science possible. It became the basis of the fight against censorship and the suppression of free thought. It became the basis for nonconformist conscience, of individualism, and of a new sense of man's dignity; of a demand for universal education, and of a new dream of a free society. It made men feel responsible for themselves and for others, and eager to improve not only their own condition but also that of their fellow men. It is a case of a bad idea inspiring many good ones.[57]

But this bad idea, optimistic epistemology, while it did inspire many good ideas, it also inspired some bad ones. Among them, of course, is the conspiracy theory of ignorance, which Popper contends has been ignored by philosophers. But another consequence of this false epistemology is "almost every kind of fanaticism."[58]

For him, optimistic epistemology

> not only breeds fanatics—men possessed by the conviction that all those
> who do not see the manifest truth must be possessed by the devil—but
> it may also lead, though perhaps less directly than does a pessimistic
> epistemology, to authoritarianism.[59]

His argument here is that because "truth is not manifest, as a rule," it is
"therefore in constant need, not only of interpretation and affirmation,
but also of re-interpretation and re-affirmation."[60] "An authority," writes
Popper,

> is required to pronounce upon, and lay down, almost from day to day,
> what is to be the manifest truth, and it may learn to do so arbitrarily and
> cynically. And many disappointed epistemologists will turn away from
> their own former optimism and erect a resplendent authoritarian theory
> on the basis of a pessimistic epistemology.[61]

For Popper, this is the tragic fate of "the greatest epistemologist of all,
Plato."[62] Popper contends not only that Plato's optimistic epistemology
morphs into a pessimistic one, but also that the latter epistemology (i.e.,
pessimistic epistemology) is the basis for his authoritarianism. In short,
Popper's analysis of Plato's epistemology moves from his early theory of
anamnēsis (i.e., the theory that there is nothing our immoral soul does not
know prior to our birth) and the doctrine of manifest truth (or, optimistic
epistemology) of the *Meno* to the later authoritarian and traditionalist
positions (or, pessimistic epistemology) elaborated in *Laws*. The bridge
from optimistic to pessimistic epistemology in Plato is found in his
Republic, a middle dialogue wherein "truth may be attained by a few—the
elect."[63]

   While Popper's reading of the history of epistemology including his reading
of Plato has been subject to scathing criticisms, the notion that conspiracy
theory plays a central role in its functioning prefigures the contemporary
moment where epistemology cannot be examined without considerations of
conspiracy theory. For Popper, the attribution of the conspiracy theory of
ignorance to modern epistemology where it was fairly unknown parallels its
Marxist formation where it is widely known "as the conspiracy theory of
the capitalist press that perverts and suppresses truth and fills the workers'
minds with false ideologies."[64]

   In order to overcome the shortcomings of both the optimist and the Marxist
conspiracy theories of ignorance, Popper proposes an epistemology wherein
"there are all kinds of sources of knowledge; but *none has authority*."[65]
This goes for both the articles found in reputable publications and the

results of an experiment. Moreover, traditional epistemological questions such as "How do you know?" and "What is the source of your assertion?" are regarded as misconceived ones. Why? Because for Popper they "beg for an authoritarian answer."[66] The traditional questions of epistemology are also misconceived because their legitimacy is never challenged, and they are regarded as "perfectly natural."[67]

In contrast to traditional epistemology, wherein conspiracy theory is one of its major consequences, Popper offers an alternate view of epistemology that can be summarized as follows:

1. There are no ultimate sources of knowledge. Every source, every suggestion, is welcome; and every source, every suggestion, is open to critical examination.
2. Epistemological questions should not be about sources, but rather whether assertions are true, this is, whether they agree with facts. The latter is achieved through testing the assertion or by examining its consequences.
3. All kinds of arguments may be used to determine whether assertions are true.
4. Aside from innate knowledge, the most important source of knowledge is tradition. Most of the things we know we have learned by example, by being told, by reading books, by learning how to criticize, how to take and accept criticism, how to accept truth.
5. The fact that most sources of our knowledge are traditional condemns anti-rationalism as futile.
6. Advancing knowledge consists mainly of modifications to earlier knowledge. Knowledge does not start from nothing, nor does it start from observation.
7. Optimistic and pessimistic epistemologies are about equally mistaken. While Plato's pessimistic cave story is true, his optimistic story of *anamnēsis* is not.
8. Neither observation nor reason is a source of authority.
9. Every solution to a problem raises new problems.[68]

It is with the last point that Popper's epistemology circles back to his early encounter with the cabinetmaker. The notion that every solution raises new problems is just another way of saying the more we learn about the world, the more we come to learn what we do not know, that is, come to "our knowledge of our ignorance—the fact that our knowledge can be only finite, while our ignorance must necessarily be infinite."[69] Finally, in Popper's view, this *infinite ignorance* that we come to know is not the consequence of a conspiracy theory associated with optimist epistemology, but rather a consequence of our belief in falsifiability, an epistemology of ignorance developed by Popper for which conspiracy theory has no role.

The Conspiracy Theory of Society

As noted earlier, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* was written during the Second World War. Completed in 1943, and published in 1945, Popper would continue to work on it over the next 20 years, with revised editions appearing in 1952, 1957, 1962, and 1966. According to Popper, though Henri Bergson was the first to use the terms "open society" and "closed society," he used these terms quite differently. In *Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1932), Bergson describes an "open society" as "society fresh from the hands of nature,"[70] albeit also the product of mystical intuition. For Popper, however, "the open society is one in which men have learned to be to some extent critical of taboos, and to base decisions on the authority of their own intelligence (after discussion)."[71] So, whereas Bergson makes a religious distinction between open and closed societies, Popper makes a rationalist distinction. According to Popper, while "mysticism may be interpreted as an expression of *the longing* for the lost unity of the closed society, and therefore as a reaction against the rationalism of the open society," it is not, as Bergson contends, the product of a mystical intuition.[72]

But just as the rationalist epistemology must be associated with conspiracy theory, so too may many rationalist approaches to society. Popper contends that the conspiracy theory of society that is held by these rationalists is "the very opposite of the true aim of the social sciences."[73] For Popper, the task of the social sciences is not "as the historicist believes, the prophecy and explanation of the less obvious dependences within the social sphere," but

> rather, the discovery of the difficulties which stand in the way of social action—the study, as it were, of the unwieldiness, the resilience or brittleness of the social stuff, of its resistance to our attempts to mould it and to work with it.[74]

As Popper describes it, the conspiracy theory of society is

> the view that an explanation of a social phenomenon consists in the discovery of the men or groups who are interested in the occurrence of this phenomenon (sometimes it is a hidden interest which has first to be revealed), and who have planned and conspired to bring it about.[75]

As a view of the aims of the social sciences, the conspiracy theory of society stems "from the mistaken theory that, whatever happens in society—especially happenings such as war, unemployment, poverty, shortages, which people as a rule dislike—is the result of direct design by some powerful individuals and groups."[76]

According to Popper, the conspiracy theory of society is a widely held view. Moreover, its origins predate historicism, which because of "its primitive theistic form, is derivative of the conspiracy theory."[77] Popper argues that the conspiracy theory of society is similar to Homer's theory of society, which "conceived the power of the gods in such a way that whatever happened on the plain before Troy was only a reflection of the various conspiracies on Olympus."[78] Says Popper,

> The conspiracy theory of society is just a version of [Homer's] theism, of a belief in gods whose whims and wills rule everything. It comes from abandoning God and then asking: "Who is in his place?" His place is then filled by various powerful men and groups—sinister pressure groups, who are blamed for having planned the great depression and all the evils from which we suffer.[79]

Examples of these sinister pressure groups include the Learned Elders of Zion, the monopolists, and the capitalists, "whose wickedness is responsible for all the evils we suffer from."[80] In sum, according to Popper, the conspiracy theory of society should be regarded as a "typical result of the secularization of a religious superstition."[81]

Yet for him, even though the conspiracy theory of society is widespread, there is "very little truth in it."[82] Nevertheless, Popper contends that conspiracy theories are typical, and they become important, "for example, whenever people who believe in the conspiracy theory get in power."[83] As an example, he uses Hitler, who when he came into power, believed the conspiracy myth of the Learned Elders of Zion and then tried to "outdo their conspiracy with his own counter-conspiracy."[84] He terms it the "Oedipus Effect" when conspiracy theorists come into power and then their conspiracies come to account for things that actually happen.[85]

Still, he contends that few conspiracies are successful because conspiracies rarely turn out in the way that they are intended. In the case of Hitler, the conspiracy that he made failed because "it is one of the striking things about social life that *nothing ever comes off exactly as intended*."[86] Popper says that those

> who approach the social sciences with ready-made conspiracy theory thereby deny themselves the possibility of ever understanding what the task of the social sciences is, for they assume that we can explain practically everything in society by asking who wanted it, whereas the real task of the social sciences is to explain those things which nobody wants—such as, for example, a war, or a depression.[87]

The exceptions here, says Popper, are "Lenin's revolution, and especially Hitler's revolution and Hitler's war," which were indeed conspiracies albeit ones that came about because "conspiracy theoreticians came into power—who, most significantly, failed to consummate their conspiracies."[88]

Popper's social theory is able to avoid the conspiracy theory often associated with rationalist social theories because it seeks to explain "how the unintended consequences of our intentions and actions arise, and what kind of consequences arise if people do this that or the other in a certain social situation."[89] As a critic of conspiracy theory, he finds in Marx an unlikely ally, who he views as "*one of the first critics of conspiracy theory*, and one of the first to analyse [sic] the unintended consequences of the voluntary actions of people acting in certain social situations."[90] Writes Popper,

> Marx said quite definitely and clearly that the capitalist is as much caught in the network of the social situation (or the "social system") as is the worker; that the capitalist cannot help acting in the ways he does: he is as unfree as the worker, and the results of his actions are largely unintended. But the truly scientific approach of Marx has been forgotten by his latter-day followers, the Vulgar Marxists, who have put forward a popular conspiracy theory of society which is no better than Goebbels' myth of the Learned Elders of Zion.[91]

Regardless though of the fact that Marx was a critic of the conspiracy theory of society, Popper clearly associates conspiracy theory with Marxism. And, as noted earlier, Popper's anti-Marxism was established very early in his life. And its association with the conspiracy theory of society in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* beginning in his war-writings only served to deepen further his doubts about Marxism.

For Popper, conspiracy theory, whether it is in relation to ignorance or society, refers to a mistake in rationalist thinking. If one strives to preserve democracy and freedom against totalitarianism, then one must conduct a thorough critique of rationalism. The aim of this critique is to eliminate conspiracy theory from rationalist thought so that democracy, freedom, and the open society have the best chances of survival. A world without conspiracy is a better world where democracy, freedom, and the open society cannot be threatened by its existence.

One of the criticisms of Popper's approach to conspiracy is "that anyone who believes an event has been caused by a secret plot must believe in the conspiracy theory of society, that is, that all events have been caused by secret plots."[92] However, argues Lance deHaven-Smith, "there is no reason why someone who believes some event is the result of a plot must believe *all* events are the result of plots."[93] According to deHaven-Smith, Popper is "confused" and "conflates" *conspiracy theories* with *the conspiracy theory*

of society. While the reverse is true, that is, "if someone believes all events have been caused by secret plots, then this person must believe that any single event has been caused by a plot,"[94] it not true that a person who believes that a single event has been caused by a plot must also believe that all events are caused by secret plots.

In logic, this "confusion" has a name: *weak induction.* In this case, Popper is being accused of weak inductive thinking. While I do not disagree that Popper's conspiracy theory of society lends itself to this criticism, I do not think it is because Popper is "confused." His aim here is to deflate both specific and general conspiratorial claims by critiquing the false epistemology upon which they are grounded.

A false epistemology is one that assumes there *are* ultimate sources of knowledge such as secret plots. For Popper, every source and every suggestion is welcome, and every source and every suggestion is open to critical examination. So, it does not matter if one believes in the true source of *one* event is a secret plot or *every* event is a secret plot: false epistemological belief only requires us to believe that there is at least one ultimate source of knowledge. For some, however, there may be many. In short, Popper believes that conspiracy theories and the conspiracy theory of society stem from the same false epistemology. Therefore, because they are cut from the same false epistemological cloth, weak inductive conflation is not a valid epistemological criticism.

According to deHaven-Smith, for Popper, conspiracy beliefs are "scalar" or "scalable," meaning "they can vary in size or scope while retaining the same basic design."[95] In other words, conspiracy beliefs ranging "from narrowly focused suspicions to grand theories of history," all "embody the same framework, produce the same motivational structure, and cause the same patterns of social action."[96] But what deHaven-Smith fails to mention here is that the framework is *false epistemology.* Again, Popper is not confused. He is just being a consistent epistemologist, rather than a bad logician. Finally, given that Popper argues that science does not use induction and that induction is a myth, it is not reasonable to assume that he would use induction—weak or strong—to make any of his arguments in the social sciences. If so, then he would truly be confused.

The Conspiracy Theory of Theory

George Soros was *not* the student of Henri Bergson. Rather, he was the student of Karl Popper, whose views of the open society proved to be formative to him. But if Soros were the student of Bergson, the Open Society Foundations initiative would look a whole lot different. Bergson, who is regarded as the first *process philosopher,* builds his philosophy not upon the falsification of theory and the identification of conspiracies of ignorance and

society, but rather on the acceptance of dynamic values and the rejection of static ones. His philosophy is grounded upon evolution, motion, and change, rather than the rejection of communism, historicism, and Marxism.

In *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, the book where Bergson coins the terms *open society* and *closed society*, the opposition between the static and the dynamic is the driving distinction. For him, the closed society can be found in our conformity to the customs and laws of society, whereas the open society is located in the dynamism of saints and heroes who go beyond the static customs and laws of society. Moreover, closed society is identified with the social, religious, and moral life of society, whereas open society is a world of mystical creativity and intuition. For Bergson, morality then has two sources: one grounded in intelligence that leads to science and its mechanistic, static ideal; and another grounded in intuition that can be viewed in both the mystical experience of the saints, and the creative freedom of philosophy and art.

The philosophy of Bergson has proven to be influential to a wide range of Anglo-American and continental thinkers. On the Anglo-American side, there is William James, George Santayana, and Alfred North Whitehead, and on the continental side, there is Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Gilles Deleuze. While the range of work here influenced by Bergson is vast, and includes pragmatism, process philosophy, existentialism, hermeneutics, phenomenology, and schizoanalysis, none of it can or should be characterized as antitheory. For that matter, not only does Bergson's philosophy not pass the falsifiability test for theory established by Popper, neither too does any of the philosophical work noted here as influenced by it. Thus, if there were an Open Society Foundation grounded in Bergson's view of the open society, it would be one that would welcome much of what we call critical theory and its legacy.

But this is not the Open Society Foundation of Soros. His Open Society Foundations were established some 40 years after the publication of *The Open Society and Its Enemies*—and 10 years before Popper's death. These foundations are guided not only by Popper's philosophy, but also to some extent by the work of others that worked with or were influenced by him. One of those individuals is Friedrich von Hayek, who as a professor at the London School of Economics in the late 1930s invited Popper to deliver a pre-publication version of "The Poverty of Historicism" in his seminar. A staunch defender of classical liberalism, Hayek, is regarded today along with Milton Friedman as one of the principle influences behind neoliberal economic theory. Their friendship, which goes back to the late 1930s when Popper was just beginning his professional career in philosophy, suggests that Hayek's "devastating critique of the epistemological limitations of central government planning in a free economy"[97] was one that might have appealed to Popper. Or, at the very least, was one that would not have been

summarily dismissed by him as a false epistemology. Hayek's critique, made in *The Road to Serfdom* (1944), was published only a year before *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945) came out.

Still, Michael Ignatieff would like us to believe that Popper, like Isaiah Berlin and Hannah Arendt, "took for granted a redistributive and welfarist vision of the state's role in regulating capitalist economy," even if he was not very interested in economic questions like Hayek.[98] Rather, says Ignatieff, Popper advocated for "piecemeal social engineering," a much more cautious model of change as opposed to a less cautious one such as Stalin's "engineering of human souls."[99] The point here for Ignatieff is to try to put some distance between the origins of open society in Popper's work, and the origins of neoliberalism in Hayek's work.

The reason for this is that by the 1970s the open society came to be closely associated with neoliberal society. As Ignatieff notes, "with the onset of a global economic crisis, the rising cost of the post welfare state and a growing backlash from white majority voters against the rights of minorities, a counter-revolution swept Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan to power" in the 1970s.[100] Centerpieces of their first-wave neoliberal counter-revolution included de-regulation, lower taxes, and the scaling back of the liberal state. And Thatcher, through the influence of Hayek—a champion of open society—came "to equate the struggle to dismantle a relatively benign welfare state with the battle against socialist and communist tyranny."[101]

Since the 1970s and 1980s, the open society has come to be associated not only with anti-theory, anti-Marxism, and anti-communism—the intellectual legacies of Popper—but also with neoliberalism, neo-conservatism, and, most recently, neofascism. While during the Cold War, the open society benefited from "growing liberal democracies with redistributive capacity, American power as defender of open society, and existential confidence that free markets could benefits us all," after the fall of the Berlin Wall, these benefits disappeared—and three major lines of criticism developed.[102]

The first is that the open society is *antidemocratic*. This line of criticism argues "external funding for civil society, for example by Western foundations, amounts to an illicit intervention into the domestic political processes of a society."[103] The second is that open society is the same as *neoliberal society*. This line of criticism maintains open society is a "violation of the economic sovereignty of nation states," which "moralizes globalization … and has nothing to say about the inequalities that open international economies inevitably generate."[104] And the third is that open society promotes values that are a "coercive and intolerant form of political correctness," which is another way of saying that the open society has "become a closed ideology instead of a pluralistic and self-critically open set of values."[105]

But I contend that a fourth line of criticism needs to be established as well. It is one that can only be gleaned by recognizing the central role of

conspiracy theory in Popper's version of liberal epistemology. This fourth line is that open society promotes a *conspiracy theory of theory*. This line of criticism maintains that the conception of the open society must reject any and all theory that cannot be falsified. However, given that all of the major theoretical work that has been developed since the rise of neoliberalism in the 1970s fits this description, including poststructuralism, feminist theory, LGBTQ+ theory, critical race theory, biopolitics, and many other areas of theoretical concern, the static notion that none of this theory has a place in the open society amounts to a *conspiracy theory of theory*.

This is particularly in evidence when one considers that much of the contemporary criticism of the concept of the open society *comes via critical theory*. To dismiss this work exclusively on the grounds that it is not falsifiable provides the epistemological conditions for the current antidemocratic, neoliberal, and coercive "open society" to continue to persist. Like the snake that consumes itself by eating its tail, the denial of a role for critical theory in a society allegedly open to critical exchange has led to an open society that is now closed and is consuming itself. The *conspiracy theory of theory* interprets theory not as a mere lack of falsifiable thought, but as the work of communist and Marxist thinkers plotting to pervert and poison our minds and instill in us the habit of resistance to falsifiability. In sum, the conspiracy theory of theory says that a world without critical theory is one of the conditions of a better world, which in the case of the open society now means an increasingly neoliberal, antidemocratic, and coercive one.

Conclusion

The open society of Karl Popper is one that is closed to theory. The conspiracy theory of theory that is now part of its framework cuts off at the knees much of the contemporary thought that can be described as critique. What this means, for example, is that none of the theoretical revolutions regarding *intersectional* issues such as race, class, gender, disability, and sexuality have a place in the contemporary open society because they are not falsifiable. Also, theoretical efforts to elevate and make space for the voices and issues of those who are marginalized, discriminated against, or subject to violence are not welcome in the open society because they are viewed as a conspiracy by theory to end the static rule of falsifiable epistemology. In short, an open society where theory that is not falsifiable is unwelcome is not a pluralistic one.

Again, in an alternate universe, where George Soros was the student of Henri Bergson, the open society backed by 32 billion dollars of his personal wealth would be one grounded in a process philosophy that influenced a wide range of contemporary work in critical theory. It would not be an open society grounded upon conspiracies. Nor would it be one where its

founder was proud to call himself "infinitely ignorant." Rather, it would be one tempered by creative freedom in philosophy and art where the mystical experience of saints and heroes puts intuition rather than falsifiability at the center of its epistemology.

Popper's epistemology of ignorance revels in the claim that there is only so much that one knows but infinitely more than one does not know. For him, the notion that it was always better to live in infinite ignorance than tyrannous certainty was cast in the long shadow of the Second World War. Today, however, we live in a world of infinite ignorance that is increasingly looking no better than the one that Popper described as governed by tyrannous certainty. Conspiracy theory has multiplied to the point where no aspect of knowledge or society is not subject to some form of conspiracy. Whereas Popper saw the open society as a refuge from conspiracies of ignorance and society, today it has become the hotbed of the conspiracy theory of theory. Namely, the position that the single largest threat to neoliberal society is our ability to critique it via theory.

In 1945, Popper regarded philosophy as the source of conspiracy theory, or at least modern epistemology through the mid-twentieth century. Conspiracy as used by him was a pejorative—it was something that is negative and to be avoided in open societies. But conspiracy also can also have a positive connotation in the sense of working or acting together. I would like to think that this is how critical theorists today are openly using critical theory in society: namely, by working together with theory we are working toward building a better world. Conspiring with theory is only a bad thing in places like twenty-first-century incarnations of Popper's open society—a society where antitheory, neoliberalism, neofascism, and an epistemology of ignorance have come to define its agenda.

Notes

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11

A SKETCH OF CONSPIRATORIAL REASON

Timothy Melley

In 2011, the Beam Suntory Corporation advertised its popular Marker's Mark bourbon whiskey in a photograph highlighting the wax-dipped stem of a Maker's Mark bottle against a solid black backdrop. A simple slogan appeared next to the bottle: "Handmade. By actual hands."[1]

To what kind of reason does this advertisement appeal? The answer would seem to be some variety of suspicious or "cynical reason," the post-Enlightenment consciousness that Peter Sloterdijk famously described as "enlightened false consciousness."[2] Maker's Mark knows that its audience is enlightened, and as Sloterdijk notes, "enlightened people see to it that they are not taken for suckers."[3] They are hip to instrumental reason, attuned not only to errors and lies but also to ideology itself. Steeped in the hermeneutics of suspicion, aware that capitalism functions through the production of false consciousness, they imagine themselves savvier than the ordinary "sheeple" who constitute the general public. Maker's Mark appeals to this self-congratulatory suspicion; it does us the compliment of articulating our cynicism for us. "Handmade?" Bullshit!! We are not simpletons. We know corporate slogans are tools for manipulating our desire. Finally, a company that tells like it is. Straight whiskey has always been the medium of straight conversation. Maker's Mark even shares our nostalgia for a time when "handmade" meant something important about individual craftsmanship. Perhaps these values are not entirely lost after all.

But what if the ad's contempt for deception is itself only another deception—a doubly cynical deployment of critique to lure us into believing that a leading brand of bourbon might *actually* be "handmade?" This was the suspicion articulated by Travis Williams and Safora Nowrouz, who in 2014 filed a $5 million lawsuit against Beam Suntory for violating

California's False Advertising and Unfair Competition Act. Maker's Mark, the lawsuit noted, produces 24 million bottles of whiskey per year—roughly one per second—and its promotional tours and videos proudly display a vast apparatus of conveyor belts, automated stills, industrial piping, and lightning-fast bottling robots in the company's cavernous Loretto, Kentucky manufacturing facility.[4] From harvest to shipping, the process requires minimal human handling.

Nonetheless Judge John Houston summarily dismissed the case. Paradoxically, his ruling affirmed the logic of cynical reason. No "reasonable consumer," he wrote, understands handmade "as meaning literally by hand."[5] Everyone, Houston suggested, knows that corporate language does not correspond strictly to reality. The ruling thus rearticulated the logic of the Maker's Mark ad—which exposes the falsity of corporate rhetoric in order to assert its own honesty—and testified to the sweeping hold of cynicism today. In an age of cynical enlightenment, the public is supposed both to recognize and to tolerate corporate deception, to be both enlightened *and* apathetic. We should expect corporate speech have the quality Max Black calls "misrepresentation, short of lying."[6] Indeed, as Harry Frankfurt has compellingly argued, such matters are best understood *not* through
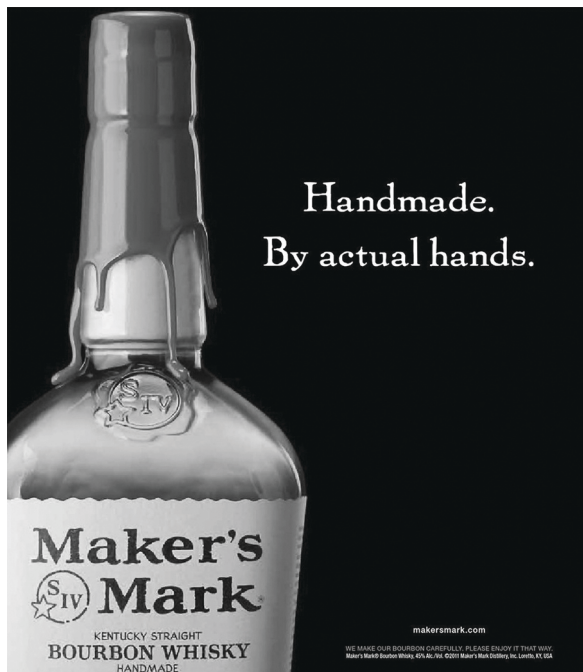
FIGURE 11.1   Maker's Mark advertisement from *MUDL Magazine* (2012).

a rubric of truth and lies but rather through the notion of "bullshit." As Frankfort notes, allegations of lying indicate a deep concern for the truth, whereas "bullshitting" reflects a lack of concern about whether things are true or not.[7] In a culture of bullshit, it is difficult to assess the truth value of institutional claims, and the public comes to expect widespread deception as a basic social condition.

What is the relation of this cultural condition to *conspiratorial* suspicion or "conspiracy theory?" At first glance, the Maker's Mark case (Figure 11.1) has little to do with conspiracy. But understanding conspiratorial suspicion, I argue, requires looking beyond its typical expressions to a wider set of assumptions about institutional power and deception. The Maker's Mark case is an instructive place to begin for several reasons. First, it reveals the self-aggrandizing cynicism of Enlightenment reason, which so delights in unmasking falsity that it often cannot stop. As Bruno Latour frets in "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?", the dominance of critical reason as an intellectual posture seems intimately tied to the nauseating proliferation of conspiracy theories in contemporary society. If Maker's Mark satirized corporate deception to gain the trust of a suspicious public, for example, it soon found its critique turned back on itself.

Second, this case marks the place where conspiratorial reason and cynical reason part ways. Cynical reason is *resigned* to deception. Conspiratorial reason is not; it is nostalgic for a lost ideal of the public sphere and it expresses quixotic rage at public deception. Faced with the ruses of power, the cynic shrugs: "of course things are this way, but what can we do?" The conspiracist, by contrast, is outraged—"outraged, I tell you!"—and bent on waking the rest of us from our mystified slumber. As I will suggest later, conspiracy theorists often fashion themselves as "public sphere heroes," self-appointed guardians of democracy, and this heroism is powerfully encouraged by a cultural apparatus that sustains the essential propositions of conspiratorial reason.

Third, however, it is difficult for the public to know whether conspiracism is indeed rooted in heroic public interest or whether it is more selfish. The runaway suspicion fueling the Maker's Mark lawsuit could, for example, just as easily be turned back on the plaintiffs, whose multi-million dollar lawsuit seems no less cynical than the advertisement—a mere posture of outrage in the service of personal greed. Such questions haunt contemporary conspiracy discourse. The outraged revelation of conspiracy sometimes seems itself a mere plot to gain public trust for the purpose of disinformation, "conspiracy entrepreneurship," or Trumpian political tactics. Yet, crucially, we can only discern such tactics by deploying a form of suspicious reason that is *internal* to conspiracy discourse. That is, whether we judge conspiracy theorists earnest public servants seeking the truth or cynical manipulators of a trusting public, we cannot think our way through the present without some tools of the so-called conspiracy theorist.

For all of these reasons, it seems important to sketch the features of conspiratorial reason. What epistemology fosters conspiratorial suspicion and "conspiracy theory?" How does conspiratorial suspicion "work" today? How, that is, does it develop its presuppositions, its claims, and its "evidence?"

These questions, like the term "conspiratorial reason," may seem odd. The more common question about conspiracy theory is how it could be so unreasonable, so simple-minded, so nutty. Indeed, the mere use of the term "conspiracy theory" often implies faulty thinking, cognitive weakness, paranoid personality traits, or detachment from reality.[8] While such factors obviously influence the way individuals develop their beliefs, openness to conspiratorial explanations is far too pervasive to be explained through psychological categories alone. It must also be seen as a symptom of the conditions of knowledge in society. Conspiracy theories are attempts to imagine institutional powers that are difficult to see and apprehend. Public knowledge of these institutions is constrained in two opposite directions: first, by forms of institutional secrecy that mystify the operation of state and corporate entities; and second, by a cultural imaginary that incessantly represents institutional deception and malfeasance. These two factors are mutually reinforcing; institutional secrecy fuels suspicion and speculation. In the postwar United States, the relentless growth of a clandestine National Security State and powerful and corporate media and public relations structures has been anything but secret. While their operations and strategies are hidden from view, their activities are "public secrets"—the objects of incessant speculation, suspicion, and representation—and this has changed public conceptions of institutional power.

These conceptions are the infrastructure of conspiratorial reason. Conspiratorial reason, then, is not simply a form of individual cognition, but also a cultural system. "Reason" here is public in the sense that it is embedded in discourse, especially narratives, about institutional secrecy and power. In the contemporary United States, which will be the focus of this chapter, cynical allegations, revelations, and depictions of conspiracy circulate relentlessly in the form of news, political speech, longform journalism, documentary, talk radio, games, rumors, water cooler conversations, social media posts, advertising, television, film, and literature. This body of discourse is circulated within three media frameworks: a 24-hour news machine organized around the revelation of scandals and "breaking news"; a social media ecosystem in which mis- and disinformation can easily be amplified[9]; and an entertainment industry that generates conspiracy fictions. This infrastructure makes conspiratorial explanation widely available to public consciousness in the form of both specific plots and more general assumptions about institutional practices. In the postwar United States, these plots and assumptions are strikingly consistent. One reason Donald Trump's conspiracy politics proved persuasive to so many voters is that

his major allegations were drawn, with minimal modification, from the American conspiracy imaginary.

From Conspiracy Theory to Conspiratorial Reason

Any sketch of "conspiratorial reason" must address the problematic term "conspiracy theory," which is often vaguely defined and carelessly deployed in the analysis of popular discourse. While "conspiracy theory" describes an age-old type of suspicion, the notion that there is an easily recognized and dismissed form of conspiratorial rationality is relatively new. It emerged shortly after the Second World War, first as a minor theme in the work of Karl Popper[10] and later in Richard Hofstadter's groundbreaking essay "The Paranoid Style in American Politics."[11] While conspiratorial suspicion was a normative form of political interpretation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,[12] it became increasingly delegitimated during the twentieth century. It is now frequently conceptualized as a form of faulty, disordered, or even pathological thinking stemming from a simplistic sense of historical causality,[13] a tendency toward paranoid ideation,[14] or "identifiable cognitive blunders" and "crippled epistemology."[15] In everyday discourse, the term "conspiracy theory" is a pejorative, implying an eye-rolling sense that a claim may be dismissed on its face.[16] Ironically, this dismissive use of the term mirrors the rejection of reason that is said to be the hallmark of conspiracy theory itself—that is, it requires confident assertion without demonstration or analysis. While this may be a reasonable tactic in political debate, it is a problematic ground for understanding the widespread public suspicion associated with the concept "conspiracy theory."

In my view, a conspiracy theory is any allegation of secret plotting or deception by a group or institution. Conspiracy theories, by this definition, are not inherently illegitimate or incorrect. *The Official Report of the US 9/11 Commission*, for example, is a conspiracy theory. It describes and documents a plot by 19 men to destroy US landmarks with hijacked passenger airliners. So, too, is the extraordinary "Joint Statement from the Department of Homeland Security and the Office of National Intelligence on Election Security," which alleged that "Russia's senior-most officials" plotted to influence the 2016 US presidential election in favor of Donald Trump.[17] In other words, *some* assertions of conspiracy are historically accurate, authoritative explanations of consequential events. Others, of course, are not. But even painfully flawed allegations sometimes point to significant problems of equity or democratic practice, and their flaws are not always rooted in their assumption of intentional institutional deception. Indeed, one reason to include persuasive explanations in the category of "conspiracy theory" is to drive a wedge between *baseless* suspicion and *conspiratorial* suspicion.

In sketching social conditions that invite—or perhaps even require—conspiratorial reason, I may appear to be defending "conspiracy theory" in some general way. I am not. Popular conspiracy allegations are often wrong, sometimes ludicrous, and occasionally dangerous. Yet it is also dangerous to define and conceptualize conspiracy theory as inherently pathological, because it takes conspiratorial suspicion off the board as a response to modern institutions.[18] There are many reasons to be suspicious of institutions, and while some conjectures are hard to swallow, the general tendency toward conspiratorial suspicion today says something important about how the citizens of democracy attain knowledge about the institutions they are collectively responsible for governing. If the United States Select House Committee on the January 6 Attack can publicly accuse former President Trump of leading a seditious "conspiracy" to overturn a US presidential election, the need to imagine and investigate secret plots seems obvious.[19]

Yet, clearly, "conspiracy theories" are only an object of inquiry because they seem politically or socially problematic. No matter who defines them as such, conspiracy theories are a puzzlement and an outrage: how could so many of one's fellow citizens doubt established facts without a hint of confirmatory evidence? It is crucial to note that conspiracy theories become socially salient *not* because they employ paranoid reason but rather because their allegations challenge established accounts of historical events. This is why official allegations of conspiracy—such as the 9/11 Commission Report—are never called "conspiracy theories" in popular discourse. Suspicious reason becomes marked as "conspiracy theory" only when it challenges a socially established narrative or worldview in ways that most people find outrageous. The history of "conspiracy theory" as a critical concept is rooted in a sense that it is potentially destructive of the public good because it questions the consensus reality on which social life seems to rest.

It is thus understandable that the study of conspiracy theory has focused on its pathology or unreason. But the emphasis on error can obscure important features of conspiratorial explanation—especially the common patterns and generalized suspicions that underpin most conspiracy beliefs. While a thorough description of these features is beyond the scope of this essay, it is important to note several underappreciated features of conspiracy discourse.

First, many socially salient "conspiracy theories" do not actually posit conspiracies, at least not in the original sense of the term. A conspiracy is a plot by a limited group that literally "breathes together" (*conspirare* in the Latin root). Most "conspiracy theories," by contrast, allege vague forms of malfeasance within a vast organization. The most socially salient American conspiracy theories concern the general operations of the Masons,

the Illuminati, the Catholic Church, the National Aeronautics and Space Agency (NASA), the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the "deep state," "the Jews," the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the Bilderberg Group, the "New World Order," the democratic elite, and so on. Notably, not one of these bodies of suspicion is defined by a single plot. Most incorporate a variety of possible (and sometimes conflicting) plots, and most are vague on specific actors and mechanisms. As historical phenomena, they are far more concerned with the potential power of banks, political parties and movements, religious orders, systems of ethic affiliation, corporations, state agencies, and other significant institutions. One implication of this pattern is that populist "conspiracy theories" are a sort of amateur social theory, an attempt to theorize the power of organizations.

Second, conspiratorial suspicion is rooted in concern about the health of the public sphere. Thus, for all its apparent irrationality, conspiratorial suspicion is a part of what Jürgen Habermas calls "public reason." Conspiratorial suspicion typically begins with critique of an "official" narrative (for example, the United States won the space race by landing Apollo 11 on the moon), and it usually implies a failure of the apparatus of legitimation itself (for example, a co-opted US press became a tool for a state propaganda project).[20] In some cases, conspiracy theories push a claim to the point where the entire surface of public life seems a deceptive spectacle—as in films like *The Matrix* (1999) and *The Truman Show* (1998). Donald Trump's claims of "fake news" give a sense of how this sensibility may be weaponized for authoritarian purposes. The important point is that, no matter their respective sources, allegations of public deception and dismissals of such allegations as mere "conspiracy theories" are battles over the functionality of the public sphere itself. It is also important to note that suspicious reason becomes "conspiracy theory" only by being marked as such by the guardians of the system of legitimation (such as the mainstream press). It is a discourse in dialogue with the legitimating authorities and should be seen not in isolation from those authorities but as part of a discursive system that includes "revelatory" accounts of covert power as well as "rationalist" debunking efforts. Indeed, despite its seeming unreason, populist conspiracy theory often bears a disturbing resemblance to its apparent opposite—critique. This is why Latour traces the proliferation of conspiracy theory to a generalized habit of debunking.[21] In addition to their common intellectual assumptions, *both* conspiracy narrative and debunking discourse are usually motivated by a desire to heal the dysfunctional public sphere with therapeutic transparency. Both see democracy as threatened—on one side by the irrationality of institutional secrecy, and on the other by the irrationality of subversive conspiracy-mongering. Both are committed to the ideal of the public sphere, and both wish to restore public reason with therapeutic revelation or demystification.

Indeed, conspiracy theorists often imagine themselves as heroes whose published "research" can fix what is wrong with democracy. As I explain later, this fantasy of "public sphere heroism" is reflected in popular conspiracy narratives, which frequently resolve in the public revelation of terrible institutional secrets.[22]

Third, conspiracy theories are not the simple, consistent, and monolithic beliefs they are often said to be. Conspiracy theories take a wide variety of discursive forms; they range in narrative complexity from a single sentence (e.g., "NASA faked the moon landing") to lengthy narratives and studies illustrated with thick description and detailed analysis of evidence.[23] More important still, they are *collective* matrices of various suspicions entertained in vastly different ways by different individuals. While the QAnon conspiracy theory, for example, is often described in the press as a belief that a pedophilic liberal elite is controlling many aspects of US society, it is in fact a matrix of social media posts, other writings, and individual imaginings that are experienced in a wide variety of ways with diverse levels of engagement and certainty by diverse publics. That is, there is a difference between someone who answers a survey expressing "belief" in QAnon and, say, Jason Frank—the self-described "QAnon influencer" who deputized himself to interdict undocumented immigrants at the US-Mexico border to protect children from being "trafficked" into the United States as sex slaves.[24]

Fourth, "conspiracy theories" are not singular claims but rather constellations of nested claims and assumptions. They include one or more central *narrative allegations* and a more diffuse set of *grounding assumptions* about institutional deception and malfeasance. For example, the claim that a "deep state" undermined President Donald Trump on secret instructions from a seditious former President Barack Obama involves both the allegation of secret plotting by Obama and a host of underlying assumptions about US government—for example, that some of its agencies are unaccountable to the public and elected leaders and that these agencies engage in undemocratic activity. Similarly, the assertion that NASA's 1969 Apollo 11 mission was faked somewhere in the deserts of the American Southwest involves more than the allegation that members of the US administration falsified one of the signature national achievements of the postwar era. It also suggests that the US space program was about more than simply a moon landing—that it was, for instance, an unacknowledged plank of US Cold War propaganda strategy—or, more generally still, that US state agencies occasionally deceived the public for strategic purposes during the Cold War. While the salacious narrative allegations of conspiracy theories get most of the critical attention, the often-overlooked grounding assumptions may in fact be more important reflections of the relation between institutional power and public knowledge. They point to the effects of state secrecy in times of covert warfare, disinformation operations, extraordinary rendition, and torture;

the corruption of democracy by campaign donations, gerrymandering, corporate, and foreign influence; an increasingly fractured mass media driven by advertising revenue, political bias, and elite ownership; the relentless subordination of public interest to the profit motives of corporations, universities, medical organizations, lawyers, and so on.

Fifth, what most often seems wrong about the narrative allegations of conspiracy claims is their nostalgic conception of agency and sovereign power. Conspiracy theories tend to see institutional power as the result of individual intentions, not social and economic structures, laws, norms, social institutions, and so on. Conspiratorial suspicion often originates in "agency panic"—a sense of diminished human autonomy in the face of complex social systems—and it frequently projects a nostalgic conception of individual agency onto social institutions, imagining them as intending agents, super-individuals with the integrity, motivation, and capacity for action so wanting in individuals.[25] The idea that history is mainly the result of intentions and plans is what Popper criticized as the "conspiracy theory of history." Hofstadter echoed this critique in his assertion that purveyors of "the paranoid style" lack "an intuitive sense of how things do not happen."[26] Michel Foucault later suggested an approach to power that retained a sense of intentionality without the need for an intending subject or conspiracy. Power, he argued, is "intentional but nonsubjective." It operates through "aims and objectives. But this does not mean that it results from the choice or decision of an individual subject; let us not look for the headquarters that presides over its rationality."[27] In making this case, Foucault notes the powerful nostalgia for an anachronistic notion of the sovereign subject. In our thinking about power, he warned, "we have still not cut off the head of the king."[28]

It is this nostalgia for sovereign agency—for the smoke-filled "headquarters" of the plotters—that provokes most of the criticism directed at populist conspiracy theories. Yet beneath their intentionalism, conspiracy theories often correctly identify social inequities. The claim that AIDS was manufactured by the CIA to wipe out Blacks and/or homosexuals, for instance, imagines a single, all-purpose "headquarters" as the source of the truly disproportionate effects of the disease. In so doing, it consolidates an extraordinary complexity of "aims and objectives" enacted through laws, public health policies, plans for foreign influence in Africa and other colonized spaces, and biological weapons development and defenses. This profound oversimplification reflects the significant difficulty of knowing and articulating the intricate bureaucratic details of decades of policy-making and implementation, some of which are classified as top secret. In other words, the "crippled epistemology" of conspiracy theory is not simply an individual cognitive failing but also a feature of the conditions of knowledge in contemporary democracy. Conspiracy theories are far-fetched in part

because the social knowledge required of good citizenship is itself *literally* far-fetched—brought to the public from afar by mass media and filtered, amplified, and distorted along the way.

Enlightenment as Revelation

Conspiratorial reason also reflects the media culture in which it thrives. Its much-derided penchant for thrilling "revelations" (pedophiles control the Democratic National Committee! 9/11 was an inside job!!) is actually a central value of conventional journalism and political culture, which thrive on "breaking news" and the exposure of scandal. Despite its rejection of expert knowledge and mainstream news, conspiracy theory often imitates the *normative* tropes, assumptions, and procedures of journalism and scholarship. And conventional discourse, for its part, often deploys rhetorical elements of conspiratorial suspicion, despite its scorn for the unsupported allegations of conspiracy theory. It can be hard to see these mirroring effects when focused only the content, rather than the form, of conspiracy rhetoric. Take, for example, the distrust of scientific expertise that drives vaccine resistance, climate change denial, and other contemporary "flat Earth" postures. The selfishness and destructiveness of these views not only seem to come from irrationalist "anti-science" beliefs, but they also reflect the paradoxes of modern risk society. As Ulrich Beck argued, risk society is organized around the technological mitigation of social threats, yet it is haunted by the possibility that technical innovations might carry new risks graver than the ones they were meant to address.[29] Moreover, the hyperspecialization required for such technical advances increases mystification among not only the general public but also specialists in other fields. Establishing reliable science-based public policies is thus a complex process requiring debate among experts, including highly publicized reversals and corrections that contradict well-meaning but simplistic attempts to promote scientific knowledge as an unchanging, univocal Truth (e.g., "trust Science"). Meanwhile, as quotidian risk mitigation becomes a growing focus of Western bourgeois life, the public is relentlessly offered "news we can use" about whether it is helpful—or harmful—to eat fat, take a baby aspirin daily, drink wine, have a mammogram, use a proton pump inhibitor, and so on.

Much of this "news" takes the form of "myth busting"—a version of the debunking often deployed against "conspiracy theory" and indeed an impulse essential to conspiracy theory itself. Consider, for instance, the 2019 article "10 Findings That Contradict Medical Wisdom. Doctors, Take Note," by *New York Times* health journalist Gina Kolata.[30] "You might assume," the article begins, "that standard medical advice was supported by mounds of scientific research. But researchers recently discovered that

nearly 400 routine practices were flatly contradicted by studies published in leading journals." Kolata is the antithesis of the stereotypical "conspiracy theorist." Like the researchers featured in her story, she is the herald of research-based medical science, an opponent of primitive irrationality. And yet her account undermines the epistemic authority of medicine, painting it as a form of "wisdom" rooted in outdated science and dismissive of new knowledge. Her article might have stressed that there is always a lag in the application of scientific research and that medical research in particular must be substantially replicated before being implemented broadly. But Kolata instead frames her intervention as a revelation—the stunning discovery of something like flat Eartherism at the heart of modern medicine. "Very smart and well-intentioned people came to practice these things for many, many years," says the review study's lead author, as if he were explaining the centuries-long dominance of the Ptolemaic worldview. "But they were wrong." The article lists only 10 of these 400 medical myths, suggesting that it seeks less to correct misinformation than to revel in the correction of experts. Despite its advocacy for science-based medicine, the article exemplifies many elements of conspiratorial reason.

Conspiracy culture is also nurtured by incessant news about the corruption of public knowledge. Consider, for instance, recent mainstream exposés of the sugar industry's role in promoting carbohydrate consumption, or Monsanto's attempts to influence studies of its Roundup weed killer, or the work of "merchants of doubt" in suppressing public concern over tobacco, climate change, and other grave threats.[31] The public is regularly alerted to stunning corporate deception and harm: tobacco executives lying to Congress; the Exxon Valdez, Bopal, and BP Deepwater Horizon disasters; bribery scandals at FIFA, Siemens, and AG; the Volkswagen emissions scandal; price gouging by Turing Pharmaceuticals; the release of the Panama Papers; account fraud at Wells Fargo; the greed-fueled collapse of Enron, American Insurance Group, Lehman Brothers, Bear Stearns, and Theranos; espionage by Deutsche Bank, Hewlett-Packard, and WorldCom; Facebook's Cambridge Analytica scandal; a relentless suppression of sexual abuse by institutions of religion, higher education, entertainment, and business; and more. The public is also inured to what Mark Danner calls "frozen scandal": in many public scandals, no one is punished, fines are easily absorbed, or nondisclosure agreements suppress public knowledge of malfeasance.[32] Yet, the announcement of such agreements also heightens cynicism about the concealment of important public matters. As Elizabeth Anderson has argued, the private sector has increasingly become a new "government" with major influence on human and civil rights.[33]

So has the covert sector of the US government. It took the Central Intelligence Agency less than 20 years to become what David Wise and Thomas Ross called in 1964 "the invisible government."[34] Seven decades

later, the US covert sector is a juggernaut of 17 agencies that generate 10 trillion pages of secret documents yearly, operate in more than 10,000 locations in the United States and abroad, and (at roughly $90 billion per year) cost more than all other world intelligence services combined. Despite the secrecy of these agencies, the public is accustomed to the dramatic exposure of their work: President Eisenhower's public lie about a downed U-2 spy plane; the Bay of Pigs fiasco; fabricated revolutions in Iran and Guatemala; the Pentagon Papers; falsified intelligence on Iraq; the Snowden files. It is easy to misunderstand the effect of this drama of secrecy and revelation. It draws our attention to the *content* of secrets, but their *form* matters more— and that form is public secrecy, the widespread knowledge that the state is doing things the public *thinks* it knows but cannot know in detail. In this strange epistemology, can citizens be blamed for suspecting institutional deception or imagining the secret operations of the state's giant security apparatus? After all, the starting assumption of conspiracy theory—that "there's something they're not telling us"—seems an accurate description of the US national security arrangement since the Cold War. This is one reason American conspiracy culture changed radically around 1960, shifting from an earlier obsession with external enemies (Masons, the Catholic Church, Illuminati, communists) to concern about the deception and malfeasance of the US government itself in the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the Apollo moon landings, alleged Unidentified Flying Object (UFO) cover-ups around Area 51, and the attacks of 9/11.

Scripting Conspiratorial Reason

There is no shortage of reasons for the public to be suspicious of institutions. If 24-hour news provides a steady stream of outrage, social media democratizes the work of revelation, putting everyone a click away from sharing news of malfeasance. And the notion of the good citizen as whistleblower ready to wake the sleeping masses is endlessly modeled in the richest vein of the conspiracy imaginary—its teeming fictions.

Conspiracy melodrama is perhaps the dominant form of popular fiction, film, television, and gaming today. Despite its formulaic nature and obvious excess, popular melodrama is a powerful stimulus for conspiratorial reason. It frequently depicts institutional secrets that are difficult to represent in journalism and other nonfiction modes. In so doing, conspiracy narrative provides in imaginary form much of the explanation and narrative glue that make conspiratorial explanations persuasive to their believers. Indeed, one reason conspiracy theories thrive despite a lack of detailed evidence is that this "evidence" is already widely available to consciousness in the form of popular narrative. It is easier to entertain a conspiracy allegation when one sees similar plots unfold nightly on television.

Like conspiracy theory itself, the conspiracy imaginary includes both *specific plots* and *general assumptions* about institutional deception. On both scores, the postwar US conspiracy imaginary is not terribly imaginative. For all its surface diversity, it rehashes a small, stable set of plots:

- Corporate malfeasance, the pursuit of wealth at any cost, the cover-up of crimes, and sometimes even murder. Major filmic examples include *Network* (1976), *The China Syndrome* (1979), *Silkwood* (1983), *The Firm* (1993), *The Insider* (1999), *Erin Brockovich* (2000), *The Constant Gardener* (2005), *Michael Clayton* (2007), and *The Big Short* (2015).
- Grand public deception, including staged events, false flag operations, or a substantially falsified public sphere, as in *Capricorn One* (1978), *Total Recall* (1990), *Wag the Dog* (1997), *The Truman Show* (1998), *The Matrix* (1999), and *Ms. Sloane* (2016).
- Stolen elections, as in *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962, 2004), *The Parallax View* (1974), *All the President's Men* (1976), *Hacking Democracy* (2006), *Kill Chain* (2019), *Mr. Robot* (2015–2019), *Scandal* (2012–2018), *House of Cards* (2013–2018), and *2000 Mules* (2022).
- And finally, the vast category that might anachronistically be called the "deep state" plot—the melodrama of secret agents, unaccountable to government or bureaucratic leadership, feverishly crafting their own diabolical policy deep in the bowels of the "administrative state." This body of work is so large that it is hard to catalogue. It includes 60 years of spy narratives from James Bond to Jason Bourne, many of them "geopolitical melodramas" about the gravest of national threats,[35] and it regularly depicts assassinations, domestic espionage, bureaucratic conflict, and the suppression of critical intelligence for political purposes. Major examples include *Seven Days in May* (1964), *The Conversation* (1974), *Three Days of the Condor* (1975), *JFK* (1991), *Patriot Games* (1992), *Outbreak* (1995), *Enemy of the State* (1998), *24* (2000–2010, 2014), *The Bourne Identity* (2002), *Syriana* (2005), *Homeland* (2011–2020), and *Snowden* (2016).[36]

It is no accident that Donald Trump built his national political platform on the final three conspiracy tropes: deep state plots, fake news, and stolen elections.[37] Trump's supporters found these allegations plausible in part because they are dramatized almost daily in US visual media, often in the form of serial melodrama. Trump, the former star of a melodramatic reality TV series, *The Apprentice*, redeployed these conspiracy tropes with minimal alteration and a scriptwriter's sense of how to keep an audience waiting for the "big reveal" of future episodes.

The fictions of the conspiracy imaginary do not simply communicate possible plots. They also reinforce a set of general assumptions about

corruption, institutional malfeasance, and brutal sovereignty lurking everywhere in contemporary democracy. These assumptions might be summarized as follows:

- Democracy is everywhere beset by attempts to subvert it. Institutional deception is not an aberration but a default setting—it is pervasive, shocking, and exceedingly cynical in its operation. In the conspiracy imaginary, for instance, it is normal for the state to casually order the murder of its own agents. This is not an exception but the rule.
- The organs of the public good are broken. The legitimating authorities (experts, the media, academia) have been corrupted. When they tell us things are safe, they are wrong—or lying.
- The good citizen can save democracy through conspiratorial reason. Citizens are called to attain the inside view and reveal it to the deceived general public. This "public sphere heroism" entails perpetual "wokeness," a willingness to penetrate the ruses of power, and the courage to share discoveries at odds with mainstream views.

The generality of these propositions makes them especially influential and portable. Conspiracy narrative articulates them in a host of small, offhand ways, quietly suggesting the pervasive dysfunction of democracy in a way that justifies conspiratorial suspicion. Some of the most important effects of conspiracy fiction, in other words, are suggestions that are *not* central to its plots but rather suggest the quotidian deceptions of the corporate or clandestine world. For example, in *Zero Dark Thirty*, as Seal Team Six walks into a massive hanger in Area 51, a general casually remarks, "Technically, these [helicopters] don't exist. I actually tried to kill this program a couple of times."[38] This tiny moment, in a film repeatedly hailed as veridical and procedural, conveys the covert operator's cynical inurement to a reality utterly hidden from the democratic public. The more melodramatic Jason Bourne films posit not only that the CIA runs covert assassination programs but also that Agency leaders casually dispatch assassins to kill agents who question the CIA's methods. These killers are plentiful, astonishingly competent, and seemingly blasé about their role in keeping classified programs secret. Crucially, these assassinations are *not* shocking revelations of the thriller plot; they are just starting assumptions, facts of life presented with a kind of ho-hum cynicism. In Hollywood's deep state, murdering fellow citizens is all in a day's work for intelligence community bureaucrats. So is killing a US congressperson (*Enemy of the State* [1998]) or a Supreme Court justice (*The Pelican Brief* [1993]). The premise of the 2009 film *Mercury Rising* is that National Security Administration leaders order the murder of a nine-year-old autistic boy for decrypting a national intelligence code. Such assumptions

are absurd in the bright light of the rational public sphere, but in the lurid shadows of the deep state imaginary, they operate like natural laws.

My claim here is not that such fictions "cause" conspiracy theory, nor is it that people cannot discern fiction from reality. It is rather that fiction scaffolds our conception of the world. It affects the way we imagine political power, and this effect is magnified when we attempt to understand institutions whose real-world operation is considerably mystified or hidden. The *fullness* of fiction is notably different from the fragmentation and tactical skepticism of conspiracy theory itself, which flourishes among those who cannot mobilize the resources to mount an investigation or produce confirmatory evidence. It is no accident that QAnon developed through the "dropping of crumbs," as cryptic social media posts are called in the Q-verse.[39] Minutiae are the stock and trade of conspiracy discourse, which reasons tactically by the parsing of small anomalies in the public record. Images don't quite line up; oddities don't fit the official explanations; small coincidences cannot be explained.

Conspiracy *fiction*, by contrast, offers the narrative plenitude that is missing in the tactical minutiae of the conspiracy theory. Conspiracy fictions depict in a rich and sensuous way how plots might develop and be concealed. Even the most melodramatic fictions cannot succeed without detailing how their improbable plots might play out—and the fine-grained imagination of such plots on paper or film increases the sense that they could occur in reality. It is notable how many major US conspiracy theories have been "premediated," to borrow Richard Grusin's useful term.[40] The assassinations of the 1960s were prefigured by the popular films *Suddenly* (1954) and *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), which scripted different approaches to presidential assassination. The Apollo moon landing was simulated on national television prior to its documentation by NASA; these simulations were aired by CBS News continuously because there were no external cameras to capture the landing.

But the influence of conspiracy representations is not simply that they depict how a particular event might unfold in reality or that they suggest a general structure for social relations. It is also that they script conspiratorial reason itself. Conspiracy melodrama romanticizes conspiratorial reason, depicting it as an ethical and heroic response to illegitimate power. It presents the work of revelation as a thrilling form of citizenship in which an innocent pursues minor anomalies and coincidences in the official record, experiences a thrilling initiation into a world of terrible secrets, and comes to understand the nature of sovereign power beneath the veneer of bourgeois social life. In so doing, conspiracy fiction models the sort of anti-authoritarian heroism that appeals to the conspiracy theorist. It promotes paranoia as a healthy antidote to the duped stupidity and cowed compliance

of the public. The public sphere hero is quixotic in the original sense of the term—a self-appointed knight tilting at windmills in the service of a mocking and ungrateful public. But in the conspiracy thriller, the hero turns out to be *right*—and the narrative's tension is not relieved until a doubting public accepts the hero's seemingly nutty allegations. In Richard Donner's 1997 thriller *Conspiracy Theory*, for example, a taxi driver's preposterous suspicions are not only validated but also greatly exceeded by the revelation of a horrifying program of mind control and assassination. In this sort of fantasy, conspiratorial reason is "woke" and smart—it occupies an inside position; it sees through the cynical ruses of power. It is contemptuous of the deceived outside, the gullibility of sheeple.

The drama of revelation is the deepest fantasy of conspiracy narrative, and the work of revelation is the epitome of "public sphere heroism." This is why conspiracy fictions so often end in publication. They offer a fantasy in which a much-reviled hero eventually delivers the truth to a grateful public. In this climax, the corrupted public sphere is healed through a dramatic act of exposure. In a classic example, Joseph Turner (Robert Redford) of *Three Days of the Condor* (1975) delivers documents to the *New York Times*. More recent versions of this spectacular moment of publicity occur in *Spotlight*, *Snowden*, *The Green Zone*, *Fair Game*, *Safe House*, and many other films.[41]

It is important, finally, to recognize the power of public sphere heroism in the politics of Donald Trump. For all their narcissism, Trump's conspiracy claims alleged the fundamental dysfunction of American democracy. The most important was his persistent assertion of "rigged" and "stolen" elections. Experts and journalists, as well as members of both parties, consistently deplored the shocking aberration and fascist potentiality of a sitting US president refusing to accept the outcome of an election. But "the big lie" proved persuasive to a large number of US citizens, including a sizeable majority of Republicans and a growing number of Republican lawmakers and right-wing journalists.

Why? The idea was absolutely baseless, as mainstream journalists compulsively repeated, but in the contemporary cultural imaginary, the idea of election malfeasance was not baseless. It was a staple assumption, much explored in both fiction and nonfiction. In 2006, the Emmy-nominated *Hacking Democracy* showed a Finnish hacker altering the results on a Diebold voting machine. Other exposés followed: *Stealing America, Vote by Vote* (2008), *The Great Hack* (2019), *Kill Chain* (2019). In 2015 and 2016, major newspapers repeatedly reported Russian plots to influence the US election. The FBI accused Russian hackers of stealing and leaking DNC emails, and in October 2016, the National Intelligence Office took the exceptionally rare step of publicly asserting a Russian government conspiracy to disrupt the 2016 election.[42]

Meanwhile, the major political serial dramas of the day—*Scandal* (2012–2018), *Mr. Robot* (2015–2019), and *House of Cards* (2013–2018)—depicted the hacking of US elections in florid detail. In the opening monologue of the first episode of *Mr. Robot*,[43] the protagonist complains of our "rigged elections." *Scandal*, the wildly popular Shonda Rhimes drama, details the rigging of the presidential election by the protagonist, the first lady, the White House chief of staff, and two other power brokers. They accomplish this feat by tampering with voting machines in a single county, Defiance, Ohio.[44]

These are mere fictions, of course, and the post-Enlightenment public knows better than to conflate fiction and reality. It knows that public reason is the guarantor of democracy, and it deplores the irrationalism of the conspiracy theorist. But it also worries that nothing is worse that being a sucker, and its fear of being duped is honed daily by a vast cultural system for fantasizing the deceptions of power. Inside this cultural apparatus, claims of a stolen election are not fake news. They are not shocking or aberrant. They are the most reasonable thing in the world.

Acknowledgments

Notes

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36 These themes and the examples are meant to be suggestive, not definitive or mutually exclusive. Some narratives incorporate more than one theme. Visual media are selected because of their popularity and cultural salience. While some examples are based on real events, they are nonetheless highly scripted, imagined, and organized around the demands of melodrama.

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